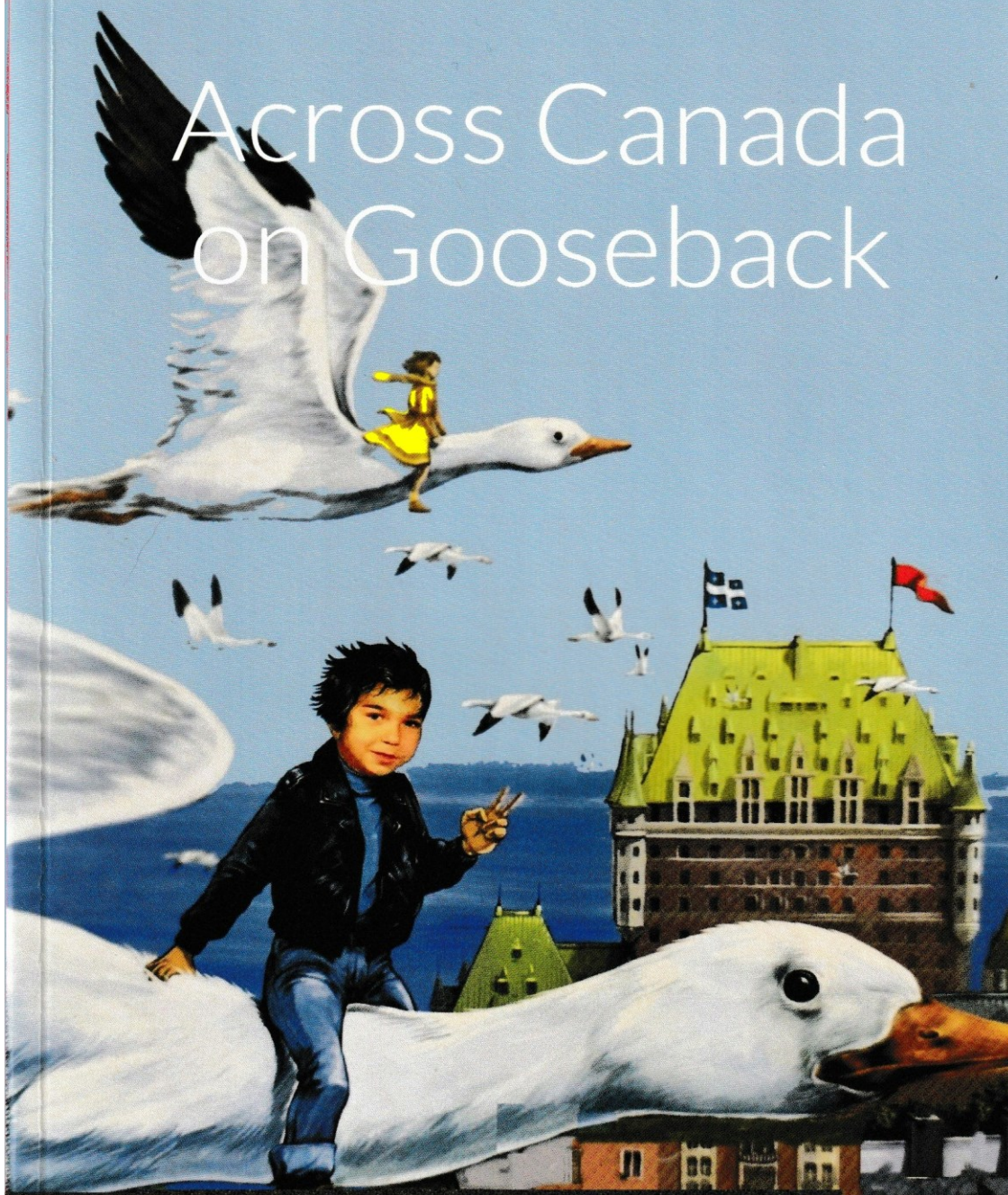


Across Canada on Gooseback



JEAN-CLAUDE CASTEX

À mes trois enfants.

ACROSS CANADA ON GOOSEBACK

JEAN-CLAUDE CASTEX

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Once Upon a Time in Newfoundland

I hesitated for a long time before recounting this extraordinary journey, so much I was convinced that no one would believe me and that I might be deemed as a mythomaniac dreamer. But the insistence of my entourage convinced me to share this unusual experience with my friends.

Anyway, dear reader, thank you for accompanying me on this fantastic journey. But first I introduce myself. My name is Caroline. Yes, that's how my dear parents named me to please an old grandmother. I was born a long time ago in Montmagny, a pretty little town, gracefully nestled on the banks of the St. Lawrence River and at the foot of the Monts Notre-Dame. My parents were teachers at the city's high school, the *Polyvalente Louis-Jacques Casault*. I was the eldest of my brother Jacques and sister Valerie. We spent a very happy childhood with parents who loved us very much. That gave us great inner strength and a good balance, which in turn enables us to give our children the best of ourselves... or at least to try to, because it's not always easy.

In the evening, after homework and before going to sleep, my mother made us thank God for everything we had. We would also ask him to help all those who were suffering in the world. We felt a little less guilty for having more than enough, when so many children had nothing. After prayer, my father used to tell us long and passionate stories in which he identified each of the characters with the three of us. And then we fall asleep on the wings of these extraordinary dreams.

One day he began to read to us: "*Nils Holgersson's wonderful journey through Sweden*." What a wonderful memory! We always feared that the ringing of the telephone would shatter the crystal of those dreamy moments and interrupt Akka de Kennekaïse's flight or Nils's tussle with the fox Smirre. Ah, that famous fox! I thought he was evil, but he was only doing what

Nature forced him to do: fight to eat. If he'd been lucky enough to find a bowl full of kibble in front of his kennel every day, I suppose he would have been kinder.

In Canada, we don't have the good fortune to house Swedish tomtes, those domestic geniuses who can transform people's lives and bodies to enable them to travel on the backs of wild geese. So, I had to content myself with dreaming of these fantastic rides.

A few years after I was born, my parents went to teach at a French Immersion school in St. John's, Newfoundland. As for me, I continued to dream that, like Nils Holgersson, I'd skim the waves of the blue sky and ride the clouds and air currents to see the whole country.



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The old hermit

One summer day, we decided to go camping in the charming region of L'Anse-aux-Meadows, which had once been the first Viking settlement on North American soil. I was delighted to think that one of Nils Holgersson's ancestors had lived here. They had built the village that the French later called L'Anse- aux-Méduses. It was a collection of large huts, half-buried and covered with grass, to protect the villagers against the biting cold of Canadian Labrador. Then l'Anse-aux-Meadows became a ghost village.

With my brother Jacques s and my sister Valérie, I liked to explore the few nearby forests of l'Anse-aux-Meadows. My parents were afraid to let us go on adventures. But they understood that life without the slightest risk is not worth living and they allowed us to wander for an hour or two every day.

During one of these small exploratory expeditions in the woods surrounding L'Anse-aux-Meadows, I met an old, wrinkled Beothuk Indian. His name was Jean Swift-Foot, although his age had made his foot no longer very agile. He lived in a tipi during the summer. I was over-surprised when he told me he was a Beothuk Native. I thought there were no Amerindians left on the island of Newfoundland. The European settlers installed by Georges 1st and his successors had driven them off the island to take over their land.

This old Indian told me in French that he had been born in Quebec on the Côte-Nord [North Shore] and that he had gone to school in Natashquan with Gilles Vigneault. He, too, had wanted to realize his dream of returning to the land of his ancestors. He lived as a hermit in the thick forest. He preferred the company of animals rather than men. He had never been

disappointed by animals. While human beings made him nervous and distrustful.

One day, after confiding all his sorrows to me, the old hermit added:

—You listen to me with great patience, Caroline! You're a nice child. That's why I'd like to give you a gift. Tell me! What would make you the happiest girl in the world?

I thought for a moment, because I don't like to answer such an important question in a hurry.

—You don't answer anything, Caroline. Should I conclude that you are a perfectly fulfilled person and that you have no desire to satisfy?

—It is true that I am happy, kind hermit. But I still have many dreams... dreams rather... impossible to fulfill.

—Impossible to satisfy? So you think I'm incapable of keeping my promise. I'm a real wizard, you know, Caroline!

—Actually, I don't want to abuse your generosity. Some of my dreams are very expensive. Others, less so. And because I suspect you have a mind and heart very rich in moral, intellectual and human qualities, I suppose your wallet should not weigh heavily. That's why I would like to find a gift that costs you nothing...

—It is to your credit, Caroline, so I ask you to tell me what is your most expensive dream and your cheapest one.

—My most expensive dream would be to give health and a daily soup to all the poor, to build them a well-heated house with a large pantry full of food.

—This is certainly proof that you are very good, Caroline. But what you tell me proves that you have not thought enough about the consequences of your generosity.

—What do you mean, Jean Swift-Foot? Don't you think that's good?

—That would be nice in theory. But Canadians would be happier if you gave them work to earn a living.

—You want to force them to work hard to acquire all this?

—Exactly, Caro ... may you allow me to call you Caro?

—Yes of course.

—Some Chinese sages say that it is better to teach someone to fish than to give them the fish all cooked on a plate. So that when the generous donor is no longer there, the other can continue to earn a living. If you give someone everything he wants, he has nothing to work and fight for in life. He will become idle and despise himself for living this way from the work of others.

—But there are so many people in our country who, for no apparent reason, live off the work of others?

—By weakness, we get used to the worst because there is, unfortunately, only the first step that .

—I understand, dear hermit.

—And what is your cheapest dream?

—I'll think about it before I fall asleep tonight. It's very late. Goodbye, dear hermit.



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The Great Book of Knowledge

The next morning, we rushed to the hermit's tipi to tell him about my wildest dreams.

—*And then, Caroline, have you thought about your dream?*

—*Yes, but he's a bit weird, and I'm ashamed to admit it to you.*

—*Don't be embarrassed. Always say...*

—*I would like my brother and sister and I to become tomtes.*

—*What?*

—*Tomtes. They are tiny geniuses the size of a hand length.*

—*You're right, it's a weird idea.*

—*Yes, I warned you.*

—*But if you become as small as tin soldiers, you will have problems adapting to our society. Life in this world is not for people who are too big or too small. You will no longer be able to open doors, drive cars, go to school and study at university...*

—*How so? Do you mean that we will be less intelligent if our bodies are tiny and less robust?*

—*Certainly not. It would be quite the opposite, because you would have to continuously solve the problems caused by your unusual size, and it would develop your intelligence faster than that of other children your age. But to return to your desire to be transformed into a tomte, you may regret it, in the long run.*

—*Yes, I know. That's why I would like the charm to last only five weeks.*

—*Oh yes, it's wiser. But why a tomte and not a simple mini Tom Thumb.*

—Because tomtes are smaller and have special powers. For example, they can speak the language of all animals.

—Ah, I understand, Caroline! But do you have your parents' permission?

—Not yet! But, anyway, I think no one can turn us into a tomtite except a tomtite. I would have to go to Sweden and convince one of these domestic geniuses.

—I have the power! replied the wizard a little offended. I assure you. The Beotuk sorcerers knew many things, and I have in my head the Great Book of Knowledge which contains all the magic formulas and grimoires of the world.

—How can you consult it?

—It's easy, I silently focus on the problem at hand, I fall asleep, and when I wake up, the first words I say are the necessary formulas.

—It's great to be able to work while sleeping. You are an amazing wizard, Jean Sweet-Foot.

—Swift-Foot! corrected the sorcerer stung to the quick. My feet look sweet, but they are still vigorous despite my advanced age.

—Oh, I apologize!

—Anyway, Caro, if you get permission from your parents, I'll transform you tomorrow.



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Ah! The famous authorization

That evening, I gathered my brother and sister who had stayed outside contemplating the multicolored flowers. I told them my incredible secret. At first, they were very surprised and even a little afraid to become tomtes. "What are mom and dad going to say?" asked Jacques. "They're not going to be happy. That's for sure!" added Valerie. So I decided to convince my parents. I was very surprised to see that they accepted the idea with disappointing ease. My father seemed to be amused by this idea. He answered me:

—You see, Caro. That's good. We happen to have to move during the summer because we found two teaching jobs in a francophone school in Surrey, British Columbia. The school is named after a writer from the West: Gabrielle Roy. So, for our part, we will leave by road, and you, you will travel on the back of a goose. It seems simple to me! All you have to do is follow the Trans-Canada Highway. You can't get lost.

I couldn't believe my ears. Mom looked at Dad with a half-smile. I was even a little upset that they so easily accepted such a perilous adventure. I found out later that on his way to bed, Dad whispered to Mom:

—Honey, these children have a brilliant imagination. Let us not discourage them. I remember that when I was a child, I too dreamed of traveling on a flying carpet!

Early the next day, we slipped out of the tent to go back to see Swift-Foot who was sleeping in his tipi in the middle of the woods. I had loaded my arms with candy, cereal, and a thousand small gifts. When I offered them to the Beotuk sorcerer, he said to me while raising his hand:

—Thank you for all that, Caroline. You are really nice. But please, bring it back home. I am not a shopkeeper but a wizard. Did you ask your parents for permission to be turned into a tomte?

—Yes, they did not make any difficulty. Oddly enough, they agreed!

—Well, in that case I'll prepare the potion. I checked the ledger last night and started simmering the magic broth.

A moment later, we drank a full bowl of this famous potion. It tasted like a good chicken broth. But... Nothing changed.

—Swift-Foot, your beverage is delicious but doesn't seem to work. We remain as big as before.

—So, you are in a hurry. It takes twenty-four hours for the potion to make an effect. Go home and tomorrow morning your appearance will have changed.

A little disappointed and even on the verge of discouragement, we returned to the camp. This so-called wizard may have been just a charlatan. We'll see. Despite this doubt, we spent part of the afternoon observing wild geese in a nearby bird sanctuary.



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The tomtes!

The day passed without any notable event. We slept fully clothed in our sleeping bag spread out on the air mattress. I had thought that, in the unlikely event that the soup... I mean the potion, would bear fruit, our clothes would only keep the size of our body if they were on us. That night, our mattress did not deflate. Each of the previous nights, we had to get up two or three times to inflate it while sleeping, because we ended up touching the hard stones on the ground.

The day had not yet completely invaded our campground, when a huge fly, the size of my hand, came buzzing near my face. I opened my eyes to see in front of me two large, multi-faceted discs watching me with attention and curiosity. Suddenly I realized that I was lost in the folds of a huge sleeping bag, and I leapt on my feet:

—Oh, that's amazing! We are tomtes.

Fortunately, our parents had gone for a health walk. Jacques and Valerie woke up and they alternately cried out in terror when they saw each other so tiny:

—Let's go for a ride to the bird sanctuary before Mom and Dad return. I am afraid they will change their minds.

We immediately jumped out of our vast sleeping bag, grabbed two cereal flakes for lunch, and ran towards the wildlife reserve. The pebbles had become real boulders that we had to go around, and the puddles seemed like ponds. The grass came to us halfway like ripe wheat and the houses stood, as tall as cathedrals. Soon we heard the chirping of thousands of birds.

—Listen! We understand what they are saying, Jacques cried.

—It's wonderful, Valerie added after having strained her ear.

Everywhere one heard: *"Don't stray too far, children!"* from worried bird parents; or: *"I'm going to get something for dinner!"* from mothers or fathers who flew away. A little further on, a black-capped chickadee asked her neighbor to keep an eye on her young, while she was away to pick some food.

—*Don't worry, the neighbor replied. I watch them as my own!*

A little mother chickadee tried to fill with earthworms the big beak always empty of a huge cuckoo that she took for her son.

—*Maybe we should tell her he is not his real child... that a mother cuckoo came to lay eggs in her nest... It's a shame that she exhausts herself feeding a bird bigger than herself, when she is not even her mother.*

—*You'd be wrong to tell him, I replied to Valerie. Parents are not necessarily those who give birth, but rather those who nourish and raise their little ones with love. A mother is the one who loves us and takes care of us.*

—*Then you mean that his real mom is the tiny chickadee? Jacques asked.*

—*You understood my idea perfectly! It's exactly that.*



A tomte

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Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-bittern

A little further on, an argument had broken out between a very aggressive shrike and a group of disgruntled birds, among which were a grouse, two starlings, some sparrows and a goldfinch. Thanks to our nature as tomtes, we could understand their language and even speak it. It was surprising to grasp the meaning of all these chirping birds, whereas until now, we had the impression of a series of more or less piercing calls. Faced with this dizzying din, we stopped, and one of the sparrows explained the cause of the argument. It was impossible to know who had started. As always in such cases, the altercation was triggered by one word too many or a sideways look, and everyone felt attacked. Apparently, the grouse had picked up a bloodworm to feed its brood, and the shrike had threatened it with its beak, pointing out that it was her territory and that the worms belonged to her. All the wars of the world begin in this way. Two nations or two people want to appropriate what does not belong to them, and they fight to the death. That's terrible. The shrike sought to seize the earthworm by shouting that everyone hated her and only sought to harm her.

From minute to minute, she made many enemies by her rapacity. Then, seeing herself threatened, she uttered desperate cries: "Moron-the-bittern! Come quickly! Bad guys want to hurt me!" It was a heartbreaking cry for help, and, to everyone's surprise, a large bittern came to rest before the shrike to protect her. A huge bird, as big as a stork, with a long, long pointed beak like a musketeer's sword and sharp claws like pirate daggers.

—What have you all, gangs of cowards, t to hurt my dear friend. Ounk-eu-lunk! Who bothers you? Who torments you, Trickster-the-Shrike ? Tell your friend who loves you!

—*All! All with no exception! Schak! Schak!* replied Trickster-the-Shrike. *I don't know what they have against me! The world is so bad! Schak! Schak!*

When I saw that the great bittern was going to throw itself on the grouse, the two starlings, the sparrows and the goldfinch, and probably tear them with great blows of pecking and claws, I rushed, forgetting my miniature size, to explain to Moron-the-bittern that I had witnessed the affair, that it was his friend Trickster-the-Shrike who had sought to look for trouble with other birds, and that, on the contrary, he had to make his friend hear reason. The bittern immediately stopped when recognizing a human. He remained as motionless as a tree branch, as when he stands still to hunt his prey. Seeing his friend intimidated, the Trickster-the-Shrike intervened without delay:

—*Who are you, insignificant human being? You are so small and so despicable that, with a single peck, Moron-the-bittern is strong enough to send you to the top of a tree.*

—*My name is Caroline, and I witnessed the argument. I know that it was Trickster-the-Shrike who started by trying to steal the earthworm from the ruffed grouse,* I replied, looking Moron-the-bittern in the eyes.

It was then that the shrike repeated my phrase imitating my voice and sneering contemptuously:

—*"My name is Caroline, and I witnessed the argument from the beginning. It was Trickster-the-Shrike who started!"* I was very surprised because I did not yet know that a shrike could imitate any animal call to deceive his enemies... or to mock. I then tried to awaken her sense of feminine solidarity.

—*Trickster-the-Shrike, I'm addressing you as a girl. You yourself are a shrike, therefore a female, and I would like you to help me calm this futile argument. Please, no violence!*

My comment set off a storm of sarcastic gossip in a group of cautious barnacles who listened silently. The shrike joined the geese in sneering:

—Ah! Ah! Ah! Schak! Schak! Listen to her, all of you. She thinks I'm a female because I'm a magpie. May I teach you, Caroline, that I am a male magpie.

—Oh, I apologize, Trickster-the-Shrike ! But I'm sure that there is a way to get along with you.

—There is no agreement possible with you, Caroline, or with any human being. They are responsible for the pollution that makes our lives hard. Moron-the-bittern, show this little girl, her brother and sister, that you are strong enough to put them into lunar orbit with a single peck.

Moron-the-Bittern the bittern then approached the three of us, slowly, very slowly to frighten us even more, followed by Trickster-the-Shrike who was preparing to tear us apart with his sharp beak as soon as the bittern had immobilized us. What to do? It was useless to flee; They were running faster than us. I shouted, "*Beware of judo!*" and the three of us took the attack position to give the two birds an "O soto gari". But that didn't stop the two bad guys from approaching us already rejoicing in the harm they were going to do to us. We saw our last hour coming.

Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-Bittern



Magnimontois to the rescue!

Faced with these two scoundrels, we were going to die fighting like heroes, because there was no question of running away without defending ourselves. I believed until then that Nature was good and that it was *we*, humans, who were the bad! I must have been disillusioned by the wry sneers, beaks and deadly claws of the two birds. Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-bittern were about to pierce and tear us apart, when, suddenly, as if by miracle, they stopped, intimidated, and began to back off. What was going on? Were they really afraid of our little hands, so small that they would have had trouble covering the bittern's big eyes? I turned around, and... miracle! Behind us stood a mighty line of twelve large wild geese, all snow-white, with the tips of their wings black. They had lined up in battle, their big menacing yellow beaks, stretched like bayonets over our little heads of tomted children. They looked as formidable as a row of infantrymen from the 22nd *Régiment de Québec*. The one who appeared to be their leader and stood in the middle of the line ordered with authority:

—Come behind us, children! Somebody is going to bleed before long!

As soon as we were sheltered behind them, the geese set off with a determined step on a brief order from the chieftain, making threatening whistles heard. Then the shrike and bittern, terrified, flew off in a hurry. But, from the air, Trickster-the-Shrike bent down to shout:

—*Schak! Schak! Be certain, wretched human beings, that sooner or later we will find you! And you will pay dearly for this humiliation!*

The goose that seemed to be the chief then turned to reassure us:

—Don't worry, children. They will do you no harm. They are too cowardly. They are like all bullies. They feel brave to intimidate the weak, but they lamentably flee from the strong.

It was wonderful. These geese, so fearful taken separately, became formidable when they decided to regroup. If all the gazelles of the world united to confront the lions, the lions could do nothing against them.

—Thank you very much for your help, we said. Without you, we were dead.

—It was a pleasure. A benefit is never lost. Humans do us a favor by organizing our wildlife sanctuaries and protecting us from hunters. It is only natural that we return the favor. Humans are an endangered species... because they are becoming too numerous on earth.

—You have a good sense of humor. But, by the way, I would like to introduce you to my brother Jacques and my sister Valérie.

—Nice to meet you. I am the team leader. My name is Tania de Montmagny!

—from Montmagny? We ourselves were born in Montmagny!

—What a lovely surprise... and what a pleasure! I noticed that you had a slight accent that was familiar to me, but I did not know which part of Quebec you were from.

—That's still extraordinary. Is that why you came to our help?

—This was an additional reason. But we always help the weakest against the bullies.

—That's to your credit. Geese have a reputation for being naive and simplistic, especially snow geese.

—Further proof, if needed, that we should never make general judgments about an entire group, especially when those assessments are negative, added Tania de Montmagny.

—So, you are wild geese? asked Valerie.

—Quite wild! For sure, we are not domestic geese. We serve no one but ourselves. We are migratory birds, Gypsies of the sky, sons of freedom travellers. We ride the clouds and air currents to visit distant countries.

—That is what I'll do myself later in my life. I want to be an airline pilot! But I'd like you to introduce us to your friends.

—You're right, I'm breaking all the rules of etiquette. Here are Roussette from Île-aux-Oies, Violette from Berthier, Iris from Grosse-Isle, Geneviève from Cap-St-Ignace, Lise from Bras d'Apic, Tina from Mont-Joly, Francette from l'Île-aux-Grues, Blanche from Lac-Frontière, Annie from l'Islet, Mariette from Lac-Mistassini and finally the jars Félix from Île-d'Orléans.

—But you are almost all from the Montmagny area?

—For sure! We met in this town on the tidal flats of the South River, not far from the water mill.

—What an extraordinary opportunity! I love this town!

—Me too,.. Me too! Whispered Jacques and Valerie.

—But what are you doing in Newfoundland, with such so tiny, so small?

—We want to travel west, to the shores of the Pacific, with migratory birds. That's why we asked a Beothuk sorcerer to turn us into tomtes.

—I see, I see... But... Correct me if I am wrong,... Migrations are usually southern in autumn or north in spring, not westward.

—Yes, usually, I replied. But we hoped to find eccentrics who would not follow the... beaten track, so to speak.

—In my humble opinion, you'll have hard time finding eccentric migratory birds. We birds are inveterate conservatives.

—That's why you like the blue... blue sky? commented Jacques.

—I don't see the connection, Felix replied. But perhaps, for once, we could change direction and fly westbound instead of north.

—Why not... Why not... said the other geese. That would be fun!

—Besides, we are already quite creative since this spring, we went through Newfoundland instead of stopping in Cap-Tourmente and Baie-du-Febvre, like everyone else.

—But where do you usually go? Valerie asked.

—In Nouveau-Quebec and Jamésie, then in Baffin Land, and in distant Nunavut. There, near the North Pole, the summer season is much less hot than in the south.



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Super nice white geese!

The geese held a special council in a circle and they unanimously decided to change their migratory route. This was an exceptional fact, because geese never change their migrations: a very historic and extraordinary event that deserved to be noted in all newspapers and even in encyclopedias. But unfortunately, at that time, the news was monopolized by a war. A great nation had invaded a small country to seize its riches. Also, our historic event (the incredible change of itinerary of wild geese) went completely unnoticed.

At Tania's request, the geese continued to graze the fresh grass for part of the afternoon to accumulate a good reserve of energy before departure. From time to time, they loudly flapped their wings to check that they were working properly.

It was no more than 13:00 when Tania gave us the starting signal. Being the guide goose, that is to say the one that would fly mostly at the tip of the Grand V, her responsibility was to check if each of the geese was able to keep up the pace of the flight. So, she reviewed her small troop, like a mountain guide before an expedition. She smoothed some recalcitrant feathers that refused to disappear in the plumage. Poorly combed feathers do not glide well in the air.

After which, she had Jacques on the back of Geneviève of Cap-St-Ignace and Valerie on Mariette of Lac Mistassini, two very robust geese. As I was the oldest and heaviest of the three children, she reserved me for her. I immediately appreciated Tania, who did not take advantage of her role as leader to reduce her own effort and get less tired. She did not grant herself privileges, as most leaders in humans. She showed us the position

we had to take and keep in the air, and what strong feathers we had to hold on tightly, to make sure they wouldn't get ripped off. So we wouldn't be thrown into space towards a tragic death, with a handful of down between our fingers.

—Put your little hands under the plumage and hold fast to the shaft of the large feathers close to the skin. There, the beards of the down are soft and will keep your fingers warm. Away from the skin, beards become too rigid and they injure fragile hands.

I was very nervous, but I tried to keep calm so as not to scare my brother and sister. I felt really responsible.



9

The great departure

After repeating the safety instructions several times, Tania had the geese placed in the flight position on fairly flat ground. The eleven geese formed a large V behind her. Then she shouted, "*Forward!*" The troop began to run flapping their wings. I confess that I was scared to death. I closed my eyes, desperately clutching the large feathers on her back in my sweaty hands, my arms being too short to go around the mighty neck of Tania of Montmagny. Then, suddenly, the tremors of the race faded; The take-off was successful. I spread my eyelids a little. The ground was moving away from us. It was wonderful and scary at the same time. I was sweating with fear and elation, but the wind caressing my cheeks quickly dried my sweat as it cooled me down. What a joy! Little by little, we were rising into the blue sky of Newfoundland; A cloudless sky. Oh no! There, very high in altitude, the white filaments of a cirrus seemed to wish us bon voyage.

—*Are you okay?* shouted Tania of Montmagny, turning her head halfway.

—*Yes! Everything's fine!*

The geese flapped their wings mightily. I felt against my chest —because Tania had made us lie on our stomachs to show less resistance to the air— the muscles of the guide goose that acted the wings. Her body was a prodigious machine. When the wings pointed downwards, I could perceive against me a muscle mass, a real dorsal hump that vibrated like a bow. They transformed two or three hundred grams of grass into energy, and could thus travel 600 kilometers and more without stopping. The first wing strokes had been very noisy. With great fanfare, the long black feathers of the tip whipped the air that slammed under the shock, and we rose irresistibly in altitude.

The wings rested on the layers of air like the fins of fish on the water. I turned back to my brother and sister, far on the back sides. They seemed fascinated by the scenery. You could see the landscape as if on television. To my right stretched as far as the eye could see the vast Gulf of St. Lawrence, as large as Great Britain. In the distance, behind us, beyond the Strait of Belle Isle, was the coast of the beautiful Province of Quebec, as large as France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands combined.

As we climbed to higher altitudes, the horizon slipped even further away, as if refusing to be captured by our eyes. Little by little, Tania headed south, and we followed the French coast of Newfoundland. Here, many Acadians exiled from their homeland had taken refuge.

—Look at the big iceberg out there... and the group of whales. It's so beautiful, Jacques shouted, turning around to get our attention.

Indeed, very close to the huge iceberg, two whales were diving while caressing the waves with the flat of their giant tails. Further on, newborn babies were playing around their very vigilant mothers. At the water's edge, seals twirled at the foot of the cliffs, and below us, 300 meters below, two moose were running out of breath. The day passed in shouts of admiration.



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600 km per day!

All the landscapes surprised us, while the geese were rather jaded.

—Tania of Montmagny, look over there, it's so magnificent. How can you leave this country in winter to warm countries? How are you able to live without these beautiful landscapes to go to the Gulf of Mexico?

Here the coast was split by numerous glacial lakes that sometimes opened in fjords on the sea. One of these fjords was particularly splendid, and Tania, who had already flown over the region, told us that it was the Bonne-Baie on the edge of which stood the Gos-Morne, a mountain that stood proudly 800 meters in the sky. The top of its skull flattened by erosion was covered with lichens and a few rare bushes.

—You geese, how do you remember your way when you migrate in the early season and in the fall? I asked.

—We memorize it by hovering over it and remember it all our lives... all our lives.

—It must be very hard.

—No more than learning to read and write for you humans. You know, Caroline, it's our instinct that pushes us south, without knowing why... Our parents guided us the first time, and we recorded the landscapes. That's it.

—Let's get down a bit to ask the name of this beautiful bay. Do you want me to replace you at the tip of the V?
Tania of Montmagny asked the jar.

—No! Today I will always fly in the lead. The stage is not long.

—*Why don't you stay at the forefront all the time?* Jacques added.

—*Because it's very tiring. By flapping our wings, we produce two drafts of airflow that lift the other geese behind us. That's why we fly in V. So, we go much further. By replacing each other at the tip of the V, we can easily fly over 600 km, and even more, in a single day. I have done some exhausting stages of 1200 km.*

—*It's like cyclists who get followed,* I added.

—*That's right! If one of us starts sulking, she never leaves the line, because she immediately feels the resistance of the air. And she gets tired so quickly that she can no longer keep up with the group. United we stand, divided we fall.*

—*When the first one is tired, what do you do?*

—*You can feel when the leading goose begins to lose her energy. At first, we try to encourage her with "Go! Go ahead! All these cries sustain her, but when she persists in slowing down, she is asked to go behind. We shout: "Get out! Pick up!" So, she leaves the tip and goes to the tail. One of the next two takes its place.*

—*This is really solidarity.*

—*Absolutely. When one of us is ill, we stop to help and protect her.*

Gros-Morne National Park, Newfoundl



11

La-Baie-des-Isles

A little further, the geese went down a little and Tania of Montmagny asked a blue jay whose beak pinched a twig:

—*Where are we, beautiful blue jay? How is this bay full of islands called?*

—*It's the Baie-des-Isles, wild goose! This is the Baie-des-Isles!* shouted the bird.

—*A very romantic name*, Annie of l'Islet replied, the second last in the line.

The geese were tired of flying and Tania de Montmagny ordered:

—*The sun is beginning to brush the horizon and night will soon fall. We will take advantage of the last light of the day to choose a deserted islet, in this large bay, and then we will eat before sleeping. We need it, and the children even more than us, because they are not used to traveling this way.*

Tania de Montmagny chose to land in a very small islet of the bay, Île Verte. Jacques, Valerie and I immediately jumped into the grass and made a few movements to relax our numb limbs. Without wasting time, the geese began to graze with enthusiasm, in order to replenish their body with energy.

That evening, as at almost every stage, we washed our underwear. Our washed laundry was then placed under the wing of a goose. The night has gradually erased the beautiful landscapes of Newfoundland, like a perfectionist painter who wants to try to do better the next day. Each of us slept under the comfortable wing of his goose. James had first tried to sleep in the nest of a sparrow, but the bird chased him away.

Before falling asleep under the wing of Tania of Montmagny, I wanted to know how our friends the wild geese were going to spend the night. I noticed with interest that they sleep in different ways, much like all animals and ourselves. Some floated on the water, their heads turned on their backs. Others kept their heads under their wings. Mariette and Geneviève slept on the ground; their legs tucked under their bodies. Roussette and Lise spent the night standing, one on one leg and the other on both; head under the wing. Iris of Grosse-Isle stood guard part of the night to watch over the sleep of others. She told me the next day that she was picked up in the middle of the night by Felix who took over until the early morning.

In the sky, the full moon was crowned with a small cloud. It shaped like a heart. I thought of my parents, already so far away.



12

Port-au-Basque

Dawn woke us up reluctantly, so tired were we from a night alarm. In the middle of the night, a gray wolf came to prowl around our herd. At night, all wolves are gray, like cats. But Tania knew that these animals do not lock themselves in islands where they could starve. Perhaps this famous wolf was in fact only the two birds of ill omen who had so wickedly threatened us with reprisals at Anse-aux-Meadows. A puffin announced to us by shaking his big red beak that we had slept a few centimeters from a carnivorous plant, a purple buckwheat; the official flower of Newfoundland. We shuddered with horror.

The sun was rising slowly behind the Long-Range Mountains, the backbone of the Newfoundland peninsula. The horizon was all rosy, like our future. It was surprisingly beautiful. We quickly prepared as Tania couldn't wait to take off. The Big V rose into the blue sky. A hundred kilometers further south, I noticed that we were going to arrive at the southern end of the island of Newfoundland. Beyond that, it would be the sea. On the horizon even further, we saw another land. Valerie asked a house sparrow that passed a little below:

—*What is the name of this village nestled in the greenery at the end of the main road?*

—*This is Port-au-Basque! the sparrow replied.*

—*Why are there these large wooden docks?*

—*For the ferryboats crossing the Cabot District! replied cheerfully the bird. This highway is the Trans-Canada Highway that unites all Canadians from coast to coast. The longest road in the world with nearly 8,000 kilometers, from St. Johns to Victoria.*

Jacques saw before the others a white ferry that was cruising in the middle of the strait. On the right, towards the west, on the horizon, a long green streak in the blue of the Gulf of St. Lawrence: the archipelago of the Magdalen Islands. It was as if the Creator of the Universe had wiped his brush of green paint there after coloring the verdant forests of Cape Breton Island that we soon flew over.



Le Grand Dérangement or The Great Acadian Upheaval

13

The Wanderer

In the evening, we camped in a cool and green valley. This was a big contrast to Newfoundland's rarer vegetation. We were happy to take the break. Later, Jacques hurt his foot and a homeless vagrant came to help Valerie who is our usual nurse. While my sister bandaged her brother's foot with a fragment of cloth found in a supermarket trolley there, the poor man told us a surprising story that had happened to him three years earlier while he was hospitalized.

—Me too. A few years ago, I was seriously injured. Two other tramps from the area had treacherously attacked me. They wanted to steal what little I had.

—*It's terrible!*

—*Yes, it's sad... So, I was seriously ill, my spine was badly damaged, and I had to stay in bed. In fact, I was hospitalized for three long months. Impossible to get around on my own. I had to call on the nurse to...heuuuu...*

—*The most basic needs? completed Valerie.*

—*Yes! And with that, my body was afflicted day and night with terrible suffering. I was always whining and moaning. Another patient occupied the next bed. Fortunately, he could sit in bed for an hour each afternoon to evacuate liquid secretions from his lungs. His bed was next to the only window in the room. I had to spend my days lying on my back. Companions in misfortune, we talked for hours about our past lives, our wives, our children, our family. We described the beautiful houses we had lived in, the exciting jobs, the rich social life, the seaside resorts where we went on vacation, before giving in to alcoholism and drugs that had ravaged our lives and led us to become tramps.*

Every afternoon, when my roommate could sit down, he was at window level and spent his time describing everything he saw outside. I loved these special moments. From the room, the view overlooked a park with a beautiful lake where ducks and swans played, while children came to sail their small sailboats. The lovers walked arm in arm among the multicolored flowers. Tall trees decorated the landscape like chandeliers of greenery. You could feel the city pulsating in the distance. While my friend described all these details, I closed my eyes and imagined the picturesque scene like a painter in front of his easel. One beautiful summer afternoon, my companion described to me a parade passing by. Of course, I could not hear the fanfare but at least I saw the scene with the eyes of my imagination, so vividly my neighbor portrayed it.

—You were very lucky to have this companion in misfortune.

—A lot, you're right. But he wasn't really lucky to have me by his side... Days and weeks passed; I never ceased to thank Providence for giving me such a kind neighbor. I asked him one day why he was doing this. He told me that he wanted to help a human brother in suffering. That brought him the forgetfulness of his own cancer and his personal pain.

—That's right!

—This is the best way to forget my own problems, he used to say

One morning, at bath time, the nurse found the body of my roommate, lifeless. He had peacefully left in his sleep the suffering and horror of his sickness. As cancer did not want to let him go, he had simply abandoned his soft body as one abandons an old jacket to the fangs of a mean dog, to take refuge on a tree. Saddened, the nurse called the attendants to remove the body and bury it. The next day, I asked to be placed next to the window. The nurse, happy to grant me this small favor, made sure of my comfort, then she left me alone. As I was a spinal patient, I had a medical bed with remote control. I pressed the

button to lift the mattress to the higher height. I've reached the window level. Finally, I would feel the pleasure of seeing for myself what my friend had described to me. But all I saw was... a wall; the wall of a large hospital building! Just ten meters from my window! I asked the nurse why my deceased roommate had portrayed a different reality for me. The nurse replied:

—Anyway, the man was blind and couldn't even see the wall.

This startling story left my brother, sister and I so upset that we had a hard time not thinking about it all evening. Are there people as extraordinary as... this vagabond? I don't believe it.

Before going to bed that night, at the request of this man, we picked up the aluminum foil that contained the roasted marshmallows left all over the campfire, because wild animals eat the food residues that remain stuck to the paper,... And they die in great suffering with aluminum in their stomachs.



In a Canadian city, a statue of a homeless person on a bench allows kind-hearted people to donate clothes and food for the real homeless.

14

The first attack

[The children and geese stopped in Grand-Pré National Park in Acadia,
on the edge of the Minas Basin.]

Around midnight, I woke up. I was thirsty, so I broke free from Tania's comfortable wing. Outside, it was the full moon on the *Grand-Pré Historical Park*. It was quite cool. All around, the sparing light that fell from the dark sky created some threatening shadows. I didn't feel safe.

—*Where are you going, Caroline?* whispered Genevieve, who had taken the first turn of the guard.

—*I'm thirsty... I'm going to take a few sips of water.*

—*Be careful Caro. Do not forget that the night is full of mortal dangers. Opportunity making the thief; some beings, honest by day, let themselves be tempted in the secrecy of darkness, believing that no one will know.*

—*Yes, Genevieve. Don't worry! Thank you for your advice, which is as judicious as that of my dear parents.*

I walked away into the shadows. This Genevieve astonished me with her surprising reasoning. These animals, we think they are stupid —and it's normal, they are beasts— but some think better than many human beings. What about my parents? What become of them? They must have been so worried about their three missing children. We couldn't call because we would have needed a 25¢ coin, as big as our head. And the phone handset, let's not talk about it, it was bigger than us. What I did not know was that, at this very moment, the entire population of L'Anse-aux-Meadows was looking for us in the forest. The good hermit Beotuk had been arrested for child abduction. No one believed his story of mysterious tomtes and impossible

travel across Canada. In fact, this poor hermit will be worried until our phone call from Montreal.

I was scared in the dark, but the thirst was stronger. The black and threatening waters of the Minas Basin shimmered. I imagined the king's warships coming to carry the Acadians and poor Evangeline so far away. I was thinking of all those in the world who suffer from injustice, racism and discrimination, simply because they are different. That night, I resolved to fight all my life to defend the oppressed, the downtrodden.

Despite the fear that made my skin bristle at the slightest noise, I slipped towards the beach. I made a cone with my hands for drinking:

—*Ugh!*

I spit out the water:

—*The water of the Minas Basin is salty... Of course! This is the Atlantic Ocean. I should have guessed that.*

I didn't realize it when I washed up in the evening. I absolutely had to find fresh water to quench my thirst. I started walking again towards the light of a house, probably that of a park warden. But no sooner had I taken a few steps than I saw two big phosphorescent eyes shining in the night and I heard a strange cry that could sound like a wolf's howl. I started running and screaming:

—*Help! Help!*

At those cries, Geneviève gave the alarm by flying, and all the geese, seized with panic, also took flight. Needless to say, Jacques and Valerie, who were sleeping peacefully under their wing, had a harsh awakening by landing in the grass of the historical park. Everyone was screaming terribly and frightenedly. That's when "phosphorous eyes" lunged at me, and I realized that it was... Moron-the-bittern. I was stuck in his long beak and he was running to take off. But under the effect of

emotion and fear, he tripped over a branch, and I fell into the grass. I then took a big rusty nail that was lying around and tried to defend myself. But his long beak was far too powerful for me to protect myself effectively. And all the time, I heard the cries of Trickster-the-Shrike who no longer tried to imitate a wolf. She resumed her normal voice to yell:

—Hurry up Moron-the-Bittern! Schak! Schak! Pick up Caroline and take off immediately! Take altitude and drop her down to the ground. Schak! Schak! Thus, we will be avenged!

Encouraged by the screams of the shrike hiding in the dark, threw himself on me to the cries of *Ounk-eu-lunk! Ounk-eu-lunk!* to catch me; but holding my rusty nail by the middle, I managed to place it vertically in its large open beak; And when he closed it to grab me, he let out a cry in pain because the nail had hurt his palate. With his beak full of blood, he was preparing to flee when Trickster-the-Shrike's voice came to incite him:

—Fool! Coward! Don't run away! You are much stronger than Caroline. Pierce her with a peck! Come on, my friend, courage! Schak! Schak!

When you have a body too exhausted, like mine, you have to use your head, your brain. I told him:

—Why are you so wicked, Moron-the-Bittern? Why do you obey Trickster-the-Shrike who only seeks to make you do wrong? She doesn't even have the courage to do her evil deeds herself. Don't listen to her anymore!

I tried to address the good feelings that we find in everyone because a being is never as bad as we think. But Trickster-the-Shrike's voice came more aggressive, more vindictive:

—Don't listen to her, Moron-the-bittern. Schak! Schak! Shut her mouth with a good blow of the beak. Don't let her talk. She only tells lies!

Very submissive to the will of his friend, Moron-the-Bittern tried to get rid of the nail that prevented him from responding or attacking Caroline. In most animals as in humans, the mouth is a formidable weapon, a dangerous dagger. Fortunately, at that time, the twelve geese and the two children who were riding them –because in the meantime Genevieve and Mariette had come down to take Jacques and Valerie in rump– attacked Moron-the-bittern in a general assault. The sharp clattering of the wings, the violent and aggressive whistles of the twelve throats, and the piercing cries of the children created such a confused turmoil, a noise so deafening that the bittern fled as if he had the devil in his wake. He disappeared in the darkness and never returned that night. Tania was able to take me on her back, under the protection of the other geese that formed an impassable rampart all around.

We went to sleep a few hundred meters away, at the other end of the historical park



15

The little Acadian!

Our interrupted sleep was insufficient because the heartless sun had not slowed down its course to allow us to sleep in. In the early morning, everyone was in a bad mood. Tania of Montmagny, who had a lot of experience in teamwork, asked everyone to make a special effort not to get upset:

—You have slept poorly, and your patience is probably very fragile. Some details that usually seem minor to you, will exasperate you today.

Our guide goose resolutely took the heading due north, altitude 350m. She was hoping that our enemies who seemed to be chasing us, would lose our tracks. We wanted it, but didn't dare hope for it. The weather was excellent: sunny with, here and there, a few rare white cumulus clouds, round like cauliflower flowers, which broke the monotony of the celestial blue and announced good weather. Amused comments about the events of the night were exchanged in the sky. We were all so proud to have put these fearsome birds to flight.

—In any case, I take this opportunity to thank you for your help, I said. Without you, I would have died under a tree.

—Or rather in his stomach, Felix corrected.

—No, not at all! Moron-the-bittern is not a carnivore. He wanted to kill me just to have a good time.

—To obey Trickster-the-Shrike who hates us without a reason, corrected Valerie.



Below, the landscape was most beautiful. It was still the Bassin-des-Mines. On the other side, in a small port, the boats didn't even reach the height of the docks:

—Why is there so little water in the Minas Basin, Caroline asked a double-crested cormorant walking with a black-capped chickadee. Last night it was full, today it is almost empty? Was there an accident somewhere?

—Because it is part of the Bay of Fundy which has the highest tides in the world! the cormorant said. For this reason, fishermen must set long moorings, otherwise at low tide the boats would remain hanging from the mooring docks.

—It's strange, Valerie added.

—You are the one who's curious, commented Tina de Mont-Joly. You want to know everything.

The flock of geese flew over the Chignectou Isthmus, which connects Nova Scotia to the rest of Canada. Covered bridges were often seen. It was like a longhouse crossing a river. A herring gull from neighboring Quebec informed us about this:

—There are hundreds of covered bridges in New Brunswick and Quebec.

—This roof keeps them free of snow in winter, I suppose? I asked.

—Not at all, on the contrary, people have to spread snow under the bridge to allow the sleds to pass. The roof simply prevents the wood from rotting in the autumn rains.

Tania rose to an altitude of 2000 m. It was cooler. I had noticed that the temperature was 1° lower per 150 meters of altitude. It was therefore 13° or 14° lower at 2000 m. We would have appreciated an extra sweater, especially with the "wind factor".

—It's not very hot, Jacques whispered in buttoning his vest up to the neck.

At the stage, the geese landed not far from the last house in the village. Valerie saw a young girl and addressed her:

—*Hello, little girl. What's your name?*

Surprised by the sound of this high-pitched voice, the girl looked at the geese to ask:

—*Who is speaking?*

—*It's me, Valerie replied, waving her arms to point out her presence on the back of Tania of Montmagny.*

The girl was very surprised to see a creature that tiny.

—*You're so small I couldn't see you. My name is Lucille Le Blanc and I am 10 years old. I am an Acadian and I live in this pretty red house. And you?*

—*Valerie, and this is my sister Caroline.*

—*Hello, where are you from?*

—*From Newfoundland. We are going to the West Coast. Here is my brother Jacques. We have to leave as soon as possible if we're going to make any headway today.*

—*Goodbye, cried Lucille. Me too when I grow up, I will go and live on the West Coast.*

—*Goodbye, goodbye, the geese replied.*

Lucille did not understand what the geese were saying because only we could understand the language of animals. So, the journey continued northwest. Everywhere stretched thick forests where conifers and deciduous trees mingled, or even cultivated fields. All along the coast, fishing villages were nestled in the shelter of small rocky coves. Multicolored fishing boats lined up the docks on which hundreds of all-black lobster traps were piled up.

16

The Ghost of Gaspésie

Soon a small town appeared at the mouth of a vast gulf. Caroline leaned dangerously to ask a swallow that had approached to see the snow geese pass, what this city and the deep gulf were called:

—It is the city of Bathurst that the Acadians had once called Saint-Pierre; and the gulf is the Baie-des-Chaleurs.

—Baie-des-Chaleurs? Curious name in a cold country!

Gaspésie was so beautiful! From far and wide, light-houses stretched their necks as high as possible to warn sailors not to be attracted by the beauty of the coasts. Small houses with bright colors added a cheerful note to the coves. Tania decided to stop on Roché Percé, near Bonaventure Island, in an enchanting region. The name of Bonaventure Island boded well for the continuation of our wonderful trans-Canada voyage with wild geese.

The Rocher Percé was a huge rock carved by the sea. Its top, very flat, was covered by greenery. A hole in its side, like a cave, was open at both ends.

—Look, there is snow in some places on the island, Valerie said.

But as we approached, we realized that this "snow" was made of tens of thousands of northern gannets, large white birds with pale yellow heads whose wingtips were black. All these birds were chirping in a deafening tumult. Some gannets dived in the sea and came out with their beaks overflowing with fish.

—Oh! I understand what their big black beak is for.

While enjoying a small bird egg with my brother and sister, I saw, sitting on a rock, a beautiful lady dressed in a white wedding dress.

—Look, Jacques and Valerie! Look over there at this bride. We can see through her body. She must be a ghost. I'm scared...

—Of course not, Valerie! Don't be afraid, Jacques replied. There is no danger. If this lady is a ghost, it is because she's been dead a long time...

—And if she is dead, it is because she is not dangerous. The dead are less dangerous than the living. It's proven! I added. Besides, I'm going to talk to her.

After saying these words, I walked in the direction of the bride. I talked to her. The beautiful lady stood up, facing east. I turned to my brother and sister, stayed away, to tell them to come. They arrived hesitantly; their eyes staring on the fuzzy shape. Oh! How beautiful she was! She started speaking French, and we understood her because we were fortunate enough to speak both of Canada's official languages.

—Hello children.

—Hello Madam! I replied. Are you a specter?

—Yes. I'd rather say a ghost. It's nicer. I am here from morning to evening and from evening to morning, even when I am not visible. I saw that you came on the backs of wild geese.

—Yes.

—So where do you come from?

—We are from Newfoundland and we are going all the way to Vancouver Island because we want to visit our beautiful and great country, which is said to be the most liveable country in the world.

—You are a thousand times right. Being a ghost, I have the opportunity to appear in all the countries of the planet, and I can tell you that ours is the best one, because we have peace and we respect each other.

—*Why are you a ghost?*

—*Oh, it's a long story. To summarize my terrible adventure, my name is Blanche de Beaumont. I came from France by boat in 1740. My father had promised my hand to an officer named Raymond de Nérac, a military gentleman who lived in Montreal. However, off the Magdalen Islands, a pirate ship attacked us and captured our vessel. Men have been put to the sword, and my fate, though less implacable, has not been the most desirable. I was drawn at random as a mere object of lust by horrible pirates, and it was the captain who won me...*

—*Maybe he cheated! James whispered.*

—*I wouldn't be surprised... I hadn't thought about it... In any case, with his wooden leg, his black blindfold over his left eye, his torn scarf around his head, his rusty hook as a hand and his absolutely indescribable smell, he looked so horrific that, when he asked me to marry him, I immediately refused.*

—*But how could he be so mutilated?*

—*He explained to me that he had lost his leg and his hand during a terrible fight against the French.*

—*And his eye?*

—*One day he had a dust in his eye and forgot his hook.*

—*Poor man. So, he smelled so bad.*

—*As bad as this islet covered with gannet droppings... I did not see myself married to this individual, would he have been a great admiral of the fleet!*

—*I understand you, I added, avoiding breathing too hard.*

—*I do not know if it was out of loyalty to the officer I was supposed to marry, and whom I already loved for having seen him in painting, or out of disgust for the smell of the one-eyed pirate, in any case I refused to marry him.*

—Oh no!

—Yes! Finally, coerced and forced, I finally married him. But on the day of the wedding, celebrated on their ship, I threw myself into the sea. The thick mist prevented the furious pirates from finding me despite the searches. When the mist finally lifted, they saw my specter, and, with a gesture, I turned their ship into a rock, the *Rocher Percé*. The entire crew perished. And here I'm on this deserted islet.

—Even by the arguably more lenient standards of the time, this pirate would probably have made a very poor husband, I added.



17

The suffering little oyster

Our conversation lasted quite a long time. Then, with the dusk descending and the humidity of the sea rising, we moved to Forillon Park, a little more than 40km north, very close to Gaspé. What a charm! A true earthly paradise. Then the sun had gone to bed and the moon lit up like a safety night-light to replace the sun that was resting. We all moved to a campground. Thus, the danger was less great of being attacked by a wild animal. It was cool. Jacques, the poet of the family, pointed out to us that the sky had put on its scarf of stars, the Milky Way. For my part, I made a small fire between four pebbles, taking care not to endanger the nearby forest.

—*Forests purify our air by breathing*, Valerie said.

Mariette, who had heard Valerie whisper these last words, asked her how trees can breathe and purify the air.

—*Of course, Mariette, the green leaves feed on carbon monoxide and they release oxygen. They do the opposite of humans and animals. So, it purifies our air.*

—*You're smart, Valerie! Mariette said.*

—*When you are weak and small, you can grow by filling your mind with knowledge and wisdom. You see this woman over there, in a wheelchair. She is reading with her camping lamp. I'm sure she has deeper thoughts than most humans who have been spoiled by life.*

—*I would be curious to go and ask her, I said.*

We approached the lady who was reading under her storm lamp. When I spoke to her, she jumped and was surprised to see me there, so puny and talkative.

—*I'm a registered psychologist in Ottawa, she said. I deals with stress among public servants.*

—*Stress among civil servants? Jacques remarked astonished. How is that possible?*

—*When I was a teenager (she continued, ignoring the question which she perhaps considered ironic), I was discouraged to have to go through life with such a frail and delicate body. It was like wanting to cross Lake Saint-Jean in a pierced canoe. Thanks to this body that forced me partly into physical inaction, I was able to develop my mind. It was good compensation. As my classmates developed their muscles and learned to dance, I enriched my mind and learned to think. Do you know the history of the oyster?*

—*No!... No!... we all replied with eyes shining with curiosity. We love stories.*

—*Well, I'll tell you about it. It was an oyster barely larger than a spat oyster¹. She had found herself, by chance, in the middle of large Canadian oysters. This oyster led a quiet existence because the fishermen found it too small and let it live in peace...*

—*Sometimes it's an advantage to be different.*

—*Yes. This little oyster led a very peaceful and pleasant life, but was very bored. As this oyster was smaller, the other oysters despised it for being so unimportant and never being chosen by the pickers who came from time to time to fill their baskets. "No one wants you!" it was told contemptuously again and again. Poor animal did not know why only the other ones were picked. One day the little oyster was very sad in thinking of its bad luck. Suddenly, its valves opened with a little too much energy, and an unfortunate grain of sand was sucked into the shell. The sand grain came to lodge itself in the flesh of the animal. The problem*

¹ ●Spat: Set of very young oysters or mussels.

seems minor at first glance. But if you think about it, you realize that the grain of sand was not smooth, and its contact hurt hard the fragile and delicate flesh of the oyster. It was as painful as when sand lodged in our eye, under our eyelid...

—Oh! It's so painful!

—From that day on, the oyster's life became very unpleasant. The animal suffered badly and regretted the time when it was bored of not being chosen by the fishermen. Poor oyster? Yes! No need to complain to the neighbors. That was the least of their worries. They were totally indifferent to the oyster's suffering. So, the little oyster decided to work hard to add every day a tiny layer of mother-of-pearl coating around the grain of sand. Day by day, the oyster realized that the suffering was becoming more tolerable. And one day, instead of the terrible grain of sand that made its flesh suffer so much, the little oyster had the satisfaction of seeing that this horrible handicap (the sand grain), had become a magnificent pearl, soft as velvet and exquisite as love.

The woman in the wheelchair stopped and looked at us with a smile.

—It's a great story, I said.

—It gives hope to all those who have a serious problem, Jacques added.

—And for you, Madam, your pearl was your brain and your diplomas that helped to beautify your life, continued Valerie.

—That is correct, said the lady.



18

Mont-Joly once seemed bigger to me.

The evening was very pleasant. As usual we roasted our marshmallows while watching the dancing flames of the campfire. In the distance, a harmonica tune lulled the warm night of Gaspésie and our peaceful thoughts. On a picnic table, some tourists had abandoned a bag of pepper. Good deal. I loved this condiment. The bag was certainly too big for my small clothes, but I filled my pockets with finely ground pepper powder.

We were so well that night, under the wing of our geese that we fell asleep in a few minutes, after spreading three or four feathers to take a last sip of this pure air of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The peaceful night at Parc Forillon really freed us from all fatigue. The next day at dawn, our geese flapped their wings in the almost cloudless sky of Gaspésie. Only a few harmless stratus clouds, spread westward in uniform layers, streaked the sky at 1000 m altitude. We followed the north shore of the Baie des Chaleurs called Côte de Bonaventure to the Matapédia River. To our left, many fishing and pleasure boats crisscrossed the peaceful Baie des Chaleurs. As far as the eye could see to the west stretched the Monts-Notre-Dame, giant and frozen waves of the Appalachians, which the snow geese knew very well since they only had to follow their rocky rows to Alabama. These mountains had then put on their impenetrable drill mantle.

Finally we flew over Mont-Joly. The Big V landed on the extended tidal flats of a meadow where Tina was born. But the white goose seemed a little disappointed. She finally confessed:

—It's weird, the city is as pretty as I remember, but I thought the meadow of my birth was much bigger. And then everything

changed. No one recognizes me as if I were a foreigner. Tania, I'd like to leave. It's too sad; The reality does not match my wonderful childhood memories.

—It's always like that, Tania replied.

The wild geese slowly rose into the azure sky of the vast St. Lawrence Estuary, at least 70 km wide at this point. The guide-geese headed southwest and the snow geese obediently followed. Offshore, five or six porpoises accompanied a containership heavily loaded with multicolored boxes whose inscriptions invited to travel. It was lunchtime and the cook had probably thrown some appetizing leftovers into the sea.

Shortly before Rimouski, I noticed a large buoy that swayed offshore.

—What is this buoy used for? I shouted to a child who was playing near a tree trunk deposited by the tide on the grassy tidal flats.

—To mark the wreck of the Empress of Ireland which sank here making more than 1000 drowned! the child replied.

—When?

—A very, very long time ago. My grandmother was little.

A little further on, we flew over Rivière-du-Loup. We were going deeper and deeper into the region called the Côte-du-Sud, where most of the geese in our flock originated. At each village that paraded below us, the wild geese were heart-to-hearts shelling names familiar to their ears; Names that had lulled their childhood: Notre-Dame-du-Portage, Saint-Denis-de-Kamouraska, Rivière-Ouelle, Sainte-Anne-de-La-Pocatière. Without realizing it, our geese were flying faster and faster... Saint-Roch, Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, L'Islet... Then, without asking permission, Annie moved towards the tidal flats of L'Islet where cousins and friends she barely recognized were amused.

—Taste this tasty herb, Annie repeated excitedly. Tell me about it...

Each of the geese chewed a few strands, for form, and exclaimed out of friendship for Annie who was swimming in happiness:

—*What a delight... What a delicate fragrance! What a sweet taste! How lucky you were to spend your first years here...* Annie was celebrated like a queen by the group who wanted to show her how important she was to everyone. Isn't that love?

Then it was Geneviève's turn to be acclaimed as the Empress of Cap-Saint-Ignace, not far from the old wharf in ruins. At Lac-Frontière, Blanche had her hour of glory; and at Bras-d'Apic, the intelligent Lise was teased. She was kindly asked in which grove the *University of Bras-d'Apic* was hiding.

On Île d'Orléans, Félix, the jar, showed the house of a great poet who had made his guitar sing, and who had the same name as him, the jar. He tried to whistle one of his songs and the geese cheered him despite his false notes. Then Tania gave the order to turn back to Montmagny and the Isle-aux-Grues Archipelago to spend the night. Passing over Grosse Isle, Iris shed a few tears as she explained to her companions that thousands of Irish had died of cholera on the island that was once a Quarantine Centre for immigrants.

Vincellote Windmill in Cap-Saint-Ignace



19

Finally Montmagny!

Seeing Montmagny, our birthplace, again, I was thrilled with joy. I took Tania by the neck to kiss her, hugging her very tightly. The Grand V first flew over Mont-Magnifique where I had taken my first ski lessons. I guided my goose to the little Avenue-du-Ruisseau, where we had spent our childhood, in the house my parents had built when I was a child. At the bottom of the street, on the left, in front of a multi-family building, a young girl in a white dress was walking towards the small Mercier bridge. I recognized my friend Marielle. I shouted two or three times: —*Marielle... Marielle!... It's me Caroline!*

The girl raised her head, looked at the approaching geese and stopped, surprised. Tania landed a few meters from Marielle who was able to see me and hear my little voice:

—*Marielle, it's me Caroline! Your friend! You don't recognize me because I've become very small, but it's me.*

Marielle remained silent, as if petrified with fear, and then suddenly she ran away at full speed to her house. Seeing that I was going to cry, Tania immediately took off to lead our troop to the small port. The tidal flats of the Rivière-du-Sud were literally covered with geese cackling happily:

—*Welcome to Montmagny, a palmiped cried out who seemed to have a certain authority. I assume that you also come to the annual White Goose Festival?*

—*Uh... Not really, no... In fact, we are passing through. We're from Newfoundland and we're going to the West Coast, Tania replied after some hesitation.*

—I strongly invite you to change your decision because the White Goose Festival is the biggest party on the South Coast with the Accordion Festival... But what is this human-shaped person on your back.

—She is a completely harmless human. It's our friend Caroline who visits the country with us.

The presence of children immediately caused a stir in the Magnimontois ornithological community. Groups of furious geese began to shout at Tania and inveigh against her:

—You are a wild goose. How can you behave like a vulgar domestic goose by serving as a mount to these insignificant humans?

Two or three jars began to whistle threats at us, pointing their big yellow beaks at the three of us, the children. Impossible to hide under the dorsal feathers of our geese!

—Follow me! We're taking off, Tania cried.

One after the other, the twelve geese rose heavily, with dry clatters of their long wings in the spring air of the Montmagny tidal flats. Violette, Lise, Felix and Mariette even lost some feathers, torn off by beaks too lively.

—Well! We are not welcome. No one is a prophet in his country, simply said Tania de Montmagny.

—Snow geese are usually more tolerant, Valerie added, shaking her head. *I would not be surprised if Trickster-the-Shrike is behind this aggression and this utterly incomprehensible nastiness.*

—A few minutes later, we landed on Île-aux-Oies, three kilometers offshore.

—Francette, if you want to see Île-aux-Grues again, you will go alone. We are too tired to accompany you! said a few voices.

In Île-aux-Oies, a few houses. Only part of this island, 6 or 7 km long, forms a sanctuary reserved for geese. The rest are populated by humans, former fishermen and farmers who became hoteliers after transforming their homes into rural lodgings. There, our night was going to be peaceful.

—*We visited all your birthplaces, whined Mariette. I would like to go and see the island of Sainte-Marie de Mis-tassini.*

—*You know, Marinette, it's very far away, Tania said.*

—*I know, but... It's not fair.*

—*If you think you're a victim, Mariette, you'll never do anything good in life.*

—*But I AM a victim. I fly very often at the back of the pack and I am not allowed to change very often because I don't have the strength to hold the lead.*

—*You should rather think that you are luckier than other geese in the world. You are surrounded by people who love you and who take turns to cut your wind and facilitate your flight. You are healthy, you're doing a wonderful trip, you eat your fill, you sleep well... Why complain about your fate. Think instead of all the geese that we fatten for Halloween, Christmas or Thanksgiving, and that will die on the plate of humans in a short time...*

—*That's right, I hadn't thought of it, said Mariette, recovering her smile.*

—*Happiness is in our heads. When you feel like a victim of everything, you have to force yourself to think of those who are less fortunate than you. We have to take charge of ourselves and do what we can.*

—*Now I feel perfectly happy, Caroline. But... can we go to Lac-Mistassini? I will be even happier.*

—*I'll talk to Tania about it, if you want.*

—*Yippee! Mariette cried.*

20

A weird "stork".

At the end of the afternoon, when, high in the sky, the sun colored nicely pink the sweeps of a nimbus, I admired the hues of azure that hesitated between blue, purple, incarnate and mauve,... I saw an incredible thing, unthinkable, extraordinary... One thing that will leave you, dear reader, totally incredulous when I reveal it to you. I saw... no don't laugh... (I thought I was dreaming when I saw it), I saw a stork flying through the sky, holding in its beak a large red scarf in which moved a living being, probably a small baby. After showing the stork to Jacques and Valerie, I rushed to Tania and ask her to take me to see this bird more closely.

—I thought adults said that to please children. Tania! Will you get me a ride to this stork? I'd like to take a closer look at this baby... who's not supposed to be born yet.

Tania had some difficulty taking off. She would have preferred to eat quietly and rest. Never mind that stork! Whether human babies were delivered by these birds or in cabbages was completely indifferent to her! I really struggled to convince the guide-geese. Finally, in desperation, she made me straddle and took off, snapping her wings irritably in the calm evening air. Up there, the stork was moving south towards Montmagny.

—It looks like it's been speeding up its flight since we took off. It's weird, Tania said, beating the air even faster.

It certainly took us a good ten minutes to catch up with the strange stork. We were far from Île-aux-Oies. Arriving above the district of Normandy southwest of Montmagny, the stork has turned around to face Tania. I started yelling at the stork:

—Who are you delivering this baby to, beautiful stork?"

—*To you, beautiful fool!* replied the "stork", dropping the scarf containing the "baby".

What fell off the headscarf was far from a baby. It was Trickster-the-Shrike himself, who began to flap furiously his wings to rush towards us. The "stork", meanwhile, threw itself in the wake of Trickster-the-Shrike, and I saw that it stopped flying horizontally like a stork and took the look of the huge Moron-the-Bittern. It was a terrible nightmare. The great blue heron must have soaked in flour because it was all white. But, up close, we could see that the flour flew away like dust under feather dusters.

—*Turn around, Tania. Back home, quick! They'll kill us! Quickly! Quick!*

I must say that I have never seen my dear goose fly so fast. Suddenly, she started fleeing at breakneck speed and I felt like I was riding a unicorn. We were a Knight of the Apocalypse. She shouted:

—*Hold on tight, Caroline! Hold on to my neck; It's safer. Otherwise, my feathers will tear off.*

I couldn't answer because as soon as I opened my mouth, it filled with air to the point of choking me, and my lips began to ripple in the wind, like sticking your head out of a car window. Tania flew so fast that her wings became blurred. The air slammed like under the blades of a wind turbine. I had trouble holding on to the neck of my wild goose because my arms were too short to join my hands on the other side. So, I had to tense all my muscles and I felt more and more exhausted. I turned around to watch our enemies. They were getting closer irresistibly.

We were now flying over the industrial district. The two furious birds were gaining ground. I shouted "*Help!*" and I saw people in front of St. Thomas' Church raising their heads because we were only about thirty meters above sea level; barely

higher than the spire of the church. I was sweating profusely. Trickster-the-Shrike 's hooked beak and Moron-the-bittern's long "sword" almost touched Tania's webbed paws lying backwards. Something had to be done. If only I had a stick or an object to throw away. But yes, I had a weapon, pepper! My pockets were full of pepper! I shouted "*Yup!*", so happy I was. The two aggressive birds were so surprised by my call that they lost more than a meter; Just enough time to hold on to a handful of large feathers with one hand, to take pepper with the other. I filled my little hand with this precious condiment and dropped it right in front of Moron-the-bittern's beak. Some dust probably went to lodge in his eyes or in his nose because suddenly he let himself fall behind, under the insults of Trickster-the-Shrike :

—Keep attacking, stupid Moron-the-Bittern. Don't abandon me, coward!

These bullies don't even respect their friends.

—Wait a minute, let's see if you yourself continue to be brave with pepper in your nostrils and eyes.

As I said these words, I plunged my hand back into my pocket and threw powder in his wicked eyes. Right from the first handful, Trickster-the-Shrike abandoned the pursuit to turn back. He was no braver than Moron-the-Bittern.

We returned to Île-aux-Oies, completely exhausted. Jacques, Valerie and the others really trembled when I told them about this hallucinatory adventure.

—You want to know everything, Caroline! Tania simply told me.

That night I was so upset that I could not sleep, much to the delight of the geese I replaced all night in their night guard. The misfortune of some often makes the happiness of others.

21

The famous Château Frontenac

This unfortunate night on Île-aux-Oies was probably one of the few of my life I stayed up all night. In the morning, I was in a bad mood due to lack of sleep, but you have to find a good side to the disadvantages: first I avoided a watch on duty for two geese. Then, second benefit: I was able to see a sunset and a sunrise, less than six hours later, because summer nights are very short.

—*En route! We take off!* ordered Tania as soon as everyone was ready.

The *Great V* quickly got into flight formation, heading southwest because Tania wanted to admire Québec, the magnificent site of the Old Capital, the most beautiful city in America, classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. This beautiful city was in turn capital of New France, British North America, Canada, then Lower Canada and finally capital of the Province of Quebec. The geese made a wide detour over the proud Château-Frontenac, named after an energetic governor of New France.

—*Why are the roofs of some houses green?* asked Iris of Grosse-Isle.

—*Because they are made of copper, covered with verdigris,* I replied.

A rock pigeon from the Upper Town explained to us by clicking its grey-blue wings in the cool morning air, that in 1717 the Ursuline nuns of the city had lit a night light in their chapel, and that it has never been extinguished to this day, three centuries later. The geese were crying out in surprise. The pigeon

added that the birth records of the city, which is the only fortified city in North America, span four centuries.

—*Unbelievable!* exclaimed Jacques and Valerie.

On Parliament Hill you could see people holding placards. A little higher, upstream, stood the Quebec Bridges, the largest cantilever in the world and the Pierre-Laporte suspension bridge.

As soon as the Great V had completed the city tour, Tania of Montmagny headed north. I immediately noticed it. I've said it out loud, and it threw happiness into Mariette's heart. She was going to see her Lac-Mistassini, the largest lake in Quebec, a province that is said to have one million.

We left the narrow plain of the St. Lawrence to fly over the Laurentian Mountains, which are an old mountain worn out by an erosion of thousands of centuries. Everything is covered with a beautiful and thick boreal forest coat, with a thousand green tones in summer. Sometimes in a clearing one could see a bear with a friendly appearance, a bear mom watching over her cubs, a pack of wolves wandering or a stuffed moose in search of companion.

It seems like all living things want to have a family to love and be loved, said Tina of Mont-Joly as she watched the moose proudly wearing big antlers pass by.

—*Yes, my beautiful Tina! Love is the most important thing in the world. One day, you will all leave me, when a jar will take your heart.*

—*Or when a goose will take my heart,* added the jar Félix.



22

The Maria Chapdeleine's Country

While cackling, the geese of the *Great V* had come a long way. They had left Laurentian Provincial Park and reached the shores of Lac-Saint-Jean. We passed two pretty *northern pintail duck*², which were squirming quietly in the sky, nodding their heads, brown as chocolate. One was oddly white.

—*Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, can you tell us the names of all these lakeside villages?"*

—*With pleasure... You are above Desbiens. To your righthand, in the distance, is the large agglomeration of Saguenay, formerly Chicoutimi. On the left you see Chambord and Roberval. In front of you, on the other bank, there, Taillon and Honfleur. And over there on the left, Péribonka where Maria Chapdelaine and her father Louis Hémon lived.*

—*You seem to know the region and its history well, Jacques said.*

—*I am a bilingual tour guide in summer when winged tourists come to visit the area. They come from France, Belgium, Switzerland or Luxembourg.*

—*Bilingual? You mean you also speak English?*

—*No, I am bilingual "bird language and French. I study English at university to become trilingual.*

—*Going to university?*

—*Yes, but as a undergraduate free student. In fact, I hide behind the glass and because I have fine hearing, I can learn.*

² ● *Anas Acuta*, canard pilet. Family: Anatidae, Order: Anseriformes.

—*This Lac-Saint-Jean country is incredible. I thought that this region only produced tasty blueberries...*

Further on, Tania of Montmagny exceptionally allowed us to land in a vast field of blueberries, in order to sweeten our beaks.

—*It's tasty. I love blueberries*, repeated Violette of Berthier while devouring hundreds of blueberries. Her beak was red-purple up to her eyes.

Suddenly, while they were busy gorging on wild delicacies, we heard the voice of an angry man. Armed with a shotgun, he rushed into his blueberry field, shouting incomprehensible words.

—*XCRZBA d'stwer de NMQAB d'treowpc d'qewtrngm! Go spread your avian diseases elsewhere, wild geese!*

I jumped on Tania's back and we flew away by skimming over the ground.

—*Fly to the house, and we'll go up in altitude when we have passed it*, I shouted.

—*Why is that?*

—*Because he won't dare to fire a gun at us for fear of hurting his own family*, I replied, laughing.

The geese soon found themselves safe several miles away from the angry farmer. Francette then asked me:

—*What did he say?*

—*He spoke French, but I will not repeat his first words. He then said to go and spread our avian diseases elsewhere. People are saying that migratory birds spread epidemics...*

Invigorated by blueberries, our geese flew to a super speed; Tania of Montmagny in the lead. The rivers still flowed south, towards the St. Lawrence River. The forests were

becoming more and more sparse, and the temperature was cooling rapidly.

—*Why is it getting cold?* asked Blanche.

—*Because we're going up to the North Pole,* I replied.

—*And what is the use of this monument of encroached stones that looks like a man?*

—*It is an inuksuk, a landmark,* replied a grouse³ that passed by and had overheard our conversation. *This inuksuk is crowned with a caribou panache. It means that there is food hidden under the rocks.*



³ ●Tetraonidae or Falcipennis Canadensis.

23

Jamésie's Inuit

An hour later, the wild geese landed on the small island of Sainte-Marie, north of Lac Mistassini, the largest lake in the Quebec Province which has one million lakes.

Mariette was overjoyed to see her birthplace again. But she too found her island smaller than in her childhood memories. In addition, it was cold and the geese hurried to complete their meal to take a well-earned rest because the stage had been particularly tiring from Montmagny, almost 600 km. We did not know that we were going to break that record in Saskatchewan and Alberta.

The island was a safe haven in summer. Yet that night it was not totally deserted. To our surprise, we found two Inuits, one from Ivujivik and the other from Chisasibi⁴. They had known each other through the internet. They were on a hunting expedition despite their great age difference. They had travelled many kilometers by seaplane taxi and were to be picked up the next morning by their bush pilot. We had a great evening with them in front of a campfire. The old man, whose face was crumpled by age and the difficulties of life, spoke with his young companion:

—One day you'll die, my friend, and then your joys and sorrows, your memories and your hopes will disappear with you. Your wealth and debts, your jealousies and your plans will cease to exist. All that, today, enrages or excites you, your loves

⁴ •**Ivujivik** [53° 39' 59" North 78° 19' 59" West] is located in Nunavik. It is the northernmost municipality in Quebec. **Chisasibi** [53° 39' 59" North 78° 19' 59" W], formerly Fort George, is a coastal town in Jamesia (or James Bay region).

and your hatreds; All this will go with you. What will count will be your compassion, your honesty that has encouraged others by your example. It is not the number of friends you have had, but the number of people who have found in you the strength to do good, the courage to remain human in the midst of cruelties, the strength to remain honest when those around you are corrupt. Do not forget that after your death your memory, positive or negative, will continue to live in the hearts of those who loved or hated you. You will no longer have the opportunity to modify these memories, to improve them. For you'll be dead...

—*You are a wise man, sir, James said simply. I am sure your friend will be inspired by your subtle advice. As a matter of fact, we are.*

In the sky, an arctic tern tore through the cool of the evening shouting "*Trieg! Trieg! Trieg!*" I thought before I fell asleep that everyone should listen to the wisdom of this Inuit.

The night was very short, as we were quite close to the Arctic Circle. Francette, who watched our sleep until midnight, woke me up at the time of the relief to show me, towards the north, an *aurora borealis*. It was very beautiful; a curtain of shining light seemed to fall from the sky, vibrating and undulating like a Venetian hanging in the night breeze. White ghost in the night, a snow harfang, the Quebec symbol bird, was singing.



24

The "chasse-galerie".

When we woke up, the calm was broken by long howls of hungry wolves from the east coast of Lac Mistassini. The two Inuits had already left. They had boarded their kayak to join the seaplane taxi. Tania of Montmagny immediately headed south, following the Lac Mistassini coastline. To the south of the shimmering sheet of water, there were a few houses in the center of a peninsula on which a fleur-de-lis flag was flying. It was Mistassini-village. We then flew over a chain of smaller lakes, including Lac Chibougamau, which seemed to be heavily polluted by a nearby copper mine. From this last lake, a railway and a road allowed the ore to be evacuated.

We then felt somewhat lost in the wild nature. We ask a red dove. This bird was coming from the west to where this railway was headed. Very helpful, the dove replied:

—*This railway goes to Abitibi!*

—*OK! If we go southeast by this road, what will we find?* James asked.

—*You can't miss seeing La Tuque and Trois-Rivières.*

A large white cumulus cloud, all alone, presaged the good weather in the blue sky of the Belle Province. At the Pointe Bleue Indian Reserve, Tania headed due south towards La Tuque. A road winded through a thick black spruce forest. Ten minutes later, we landed in a green islet of Lac Wayagamac, not far from La Tuque.

The glow of our campfire attracted a bearded trapper who lived in a hut. He came to check if there was any danger of fire. He saw that I had surrounded our campfire with protective

stones. He was about to leave us in peace when I stopped him with these words:

—*Sir. I know that old people like you know a lot of interesting stories. Do you want to tell us about one?*

—*The man laughed as he sat in the grass in front of the camp-fire:*

—*You think I'm very old because I have a beard and long hair, but I'm only 39. I am very young.*

—*Oh, I apologize, sir. I didn't think to insult you. Old age is not a defect.*

—*You're absolutely right. But there's nothing fun about getting older. That's why we prefer to forget our age. This is natural. And anyway, old people are always compared to the youngest. Thank you for inviting me to join you. I do know an anecdote that is sure going to pique your interest. It happened in this region of La Tuque a long time ago. As far as you are concerned, with your goose friends, you would not need the canoe of the chasse-galerie, if you were caught here, far from everything, at Christmas or New Year's Day.*

—*The canoe of the chasse-galerie?*

—*Yes, the chasse-galerie is a flying canoe that made it possible to move quickly by air, at a time when the plane did not exist. It was really ideal for our country before our road network was built, to imagine such a fast means of transport...*

—*You mean,... like the flying carpet from the tales of "One Thousand and One Nights"? Valerie asked.*

—*That is correct. The difference was that those who wanted to use this flying canoe had to sell their souls to the devil...*

—*What do you mean?*

—*This means that some people had signed a contract with the devil: it gave them advantages on earth —wealth, happiness, travel or whatever... —but, at their death, the soul of these people became the full property of the Satan...*

—*Wow! That is scary! Is it true?* Valerie asked.

—*No, it's just a legend, invented to make people behave well on earth.*

—*Really! Fortunately!*

—*So, I continue: In those days, loggers stayed all winter in the vast logging camps of the North of our country. They left their families by canoe in early autumn and remained absent until spring; in total seven or eight endless months. It was very long and morale flew low because they did not have their wives to cherish and their children to love.*

—*It was horrible for these poor men,* I commented.

—*And probably for their wives too, completed the old trapper. At Christmas and New Year's time, morale fell below zero...*

—*Like the thermometer?*

—*Like the thermometer... Men thought of their loved ones who celebrated these Christmas time together, and they suffered greatly from being alone and without love. All these solitary lumberjacks tried to distract themselves by playing harmonica, diatonic accordion, violin, spoons and tap... One New Year's Eve, the cook at the logging camp suggested that the depressed lumberjacks spend the vigil in Montreal with their families.*

—*How do you suggest to travel so fast?* the men asked.

—*In chasse-galerie!*

—*But it's magic, and we don't want to lose our soul for a single evening of happiness!*

—Don't worry, the cook replied. It will be enough for us not to get drunk as long as you come back before daybreak. And everything will be fine!

Desperate to see their families, the loggers didn't ask too many questions. They settled in the flying dinghy. The cook shouted the magic formula: "Ah! Braille! Ah! Shines! Take us to our families!"

—The canoe took off like a jumbo jet. Soon they were flying over the city of Montreal, all adorned with Christmas garlands like a young girl who wants to please her new boyfriend. After the first anguish of seeing them appear —eternal fear that they have lost their jobs— the wives and families were very happy to see their husbands and dads. Ah! The wonderful evening for the poor lumberjacks who had fun until the early hours!

Just before daybreak, all tore themselves away from the loving arms of their families to rush into the flying canoe. All... except... the reckless cook who had forced a little too much on the... brandy. The travelers took him by force, drunk as a... lumberjack. In fact, everyone had drank too much brandy, and the canoe zigzagged dangerously between the thousands of hills and mountains of the beautiful Laurentians Hills.

Finally, the flying vehicle crashed into a tree in the immediate vicinity of the logging camp. Thank goodness everyone started running to get to their destination just as the sun was taking a curious look over the horizon to see if they were back. It even seems that the complicit moon would have lingered a little in the Christmas sky so that the sun does not rise too early.

—Whew! They were really lucky to arrive on time, cried Jacques.

—Yes! You're right, boy... Good! Well now it's time for me to go to sleep," said the bearded trapper as he stood up.

And off he went. As for the three of us, we slipped into the comfortable down of our adorable anatidae.



La chasse-galerie, airboat trip.

25

The wolf trap.

In the morning, we realized that it had been freezing during the night. In order to find some food to put in our stomach, we asked our respective geese, Tania of Montmagny, Genevieve and Mariette, to transport us to the shore of the lake. James wanted to cross on a floating tree trunk. Impossible to find!

On the shore, wild berries were on all the bushes for our lunch. It only took a few blackberries to satiate our tiny stomachs, so we were looking for the best food possible. Valerie advised us on the nutritional qualities of most fruits, mushrooms that can be deadly, and fish whose flesh would allow us to recover our physical energy and clarify our mind very quickly.

—*Fish flesh is rich in phosphorus*, little Valerie told us while raising her tiny finger to the sky, *and our brain needs this nutrient to maintain itself in good condition.*

Her teacher had taught her this at school. We walked between the green grasses, pushing aside the grass to make way for us like in the Amazon rainforest. Luckily, Quebec's cooler climate did not favor the development of diseases and viruses as much. But despite a less oppressive climate, many insects were infesting our boreal forest. And for us, so small, it was a real danger. Even though Jacques was naturally strong, and we had all practised judo and tae-kwan-do, the dangers remained threatening.

So, my brother was waking ahead, briskly as usual. With his hands, he grasped the blades of grass and pushed them away from his path. The ground was covered with pieces of tree leaves from last season and pine needles browned by death. Suddenly, my brother spotted a kind of tumulus, a small heap

covered with fallen leaves that blocked the way. He stopped and lifted a few leaves; It was a wolf trap. With branches, we cleared the leaves that hid the trap hidden underneath: a large steel leg-hold trap with a spring stretched like a crossbow. A mortal danger to any living large or small being. We knew that this kind of trap was prohibited by Canadian and international law. Moreover, the wolf itself was protected by our federal laws.

—In the past, the Government gave trappers a bounty for wolf ears, I said. They wanted to kill them all. But today we protect them, because wolves are not as bad as we believed. In addition, they are part of the food chain.

—Not to mention that trapped wolves suffer a lot before they die, their legs stuck in those jaws of steel, Jacques added. I'll immediately close this dangerous trap.

He grabbed a tree branch and threw it on the very sensitive shutter release. The steel jaws of this filthy beast closed with a terrible *Clack!* which gave us a big chill down our spine.

—This one won't hurt anyone, my brother whispered.

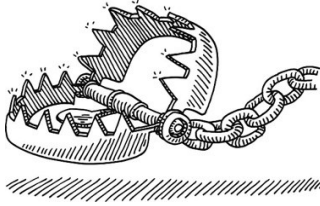
The bait was half a chicken that the trapper had probably just placed because it was in perfect condition. We took a small piece of white that we cooked between stones. After which, satiated, we returned to the shore of the lake to call the geese. That's when a skunk jumped on us.

—Careful! Valerie shouted.

But despite her scream, she couldn't avoid the attack. The skunk grabbed her by the leg and bit her cruelly on the foot. My sister was screaming loudly. Seeing us fight back with sticks, the skunk backed away, still dragging Valerie by the leg, perhaps to dive into the lake and drown her, and then devour her, because she is omnivorous. I shouted:

—Let's stand between the lake and the skunk to prevent her from pulling Valerie to the bottom of the water.

*—Hit the eyes with the sticks, these are his vulnerable points.
She is stronger than us, Jacques added.*



26

Skunk attack

Encouraged by a voice that came from the bush —a nightingale calliope voice— the skunk did not want to let go off its prey; its teeth were deeply planted in poor Valerie's leg. Mouth locked, the evil beast was no longer dangerous for us. But it was too strong to be prevented from fleeing. Suddenly, it ruffled its fur and arched its back forward, over its head. We watched its acrobatics with surprise. The skunk lowered its tail which was now falling like a puff above its head to release its butt that appeared deep in the bristly fur. Seeing this animal in this weird position, I threw myself at it with Jacques to hit with a stick. But a nighthawk twirling in its erratic flight suddenly shouted:

—Be careful! The skunk's going to sprinkle you!

No sooner had he shouted this that two jets of a greenish, stinking liquid struck me in the face. We fell backwards and the skunk then let go off Valerie's leg to rush at me and take me too in its foaming mouth. That's when I felt that this liquid had made me completely blind. It was over, I would not see my parents who loved us so much. I saw my whole childhood as a quick movie and got prepared to die. Suddenly, our twelve geese attacked the skunk in a dive, one after the other, uttering shrill cries. At the same time, they bombarded the skunk with stones and their excrement. Some geese even had the audacity in passing to pull out some of its hair bristling with fear. It was too much for the skunk who, without question, plunged into the lake with a great *splash* of relief for everyone.

Tania of Montmagny, Geneviève and Mariette approached the ground and did not even take the time to land. Each one grabbed their protégé, blind or fainted, in their beaks

by a leg or an arm, and deposited him on the small island where we felt safe.

A few moments later, I regained my vision and Valerie came out of her fainting.

—You smell bad... bad... I think I'm going to faint again, poor Valerie said, making a grimace of pain that sounded like a smile.

—Have you heard the voice of the nightingale calliope coming from the bush and encouraging the skunk to hurt us? James said. I'm sure it was Trickster-the-Shrike!

—In any case, it was not the voice of the shrike, I replied.

—You forget that shrikes can imitate the voices of other animals to mock or fool them, Jacques insisted. I'm sure it was Trickster-the-Shrike who imitated the nightingale. The proof is that there is no calliope nightingale in Quebec.

Valerie was in a lot of pain. So, her goose laid her on a fresh maple leaf that she had gone to pick, and everyone applied themselves to care for her as best they could. The injury required stopping on a farm and asking for honey, because this product heals wounds well. In the meantime, in order to kill dangerous microbes, we have spread her own saliva on her wounds.



27

Grand'Mère's farmer

The sun was almost at its zenith when the Great V finally took off. Climbing into the air, we saw the skunk hidden in the brush.

—I understand why this animal has white marks on its back and smells so bad, I said laughing, thinking of the projectiles with which the geese had bombarded it.

We followed the Saint-Maurice River. Above all, tree trunks, logs, clogged the streams. Log drivers with poles and unstable balance on the driftwood tried to clear the wooden embacle. A huge rock on the edge resembled an old woman. I scrutinized every farm interview and finally launched the landing signal:

—There, downstairs, the first house in the village has five hives in the backyard. These farmers produce honey. Get down!

The hives were surrounded by a fence intended to protect them from greedy bears. The geese landed and great was the surprise of a little girl seeing the snow geese approaching and especially hearing a fine voice say to her:

—Say, we need a little honey to treat my sister who is hurt. Could you ask your mom?

The kid looked at the geese without understanding. She had not yet noticed the tiny beings perched on the backs of the birds. Then she saw me and opened her eyes and mouth wide. No words could come out of her gaping mouth.

—Don't be afraid. We are nice. We just honey.

Finally the girl went to announce the news to her mother. They put Valerie in a doll's bed. The mother ran a disinfectant liquid over the wounds and then applied a honey plaster to the

injured leg. While the mother was treating Valerie, the kid was answering our questions.

—What is the name of this village where you live with your mother?

—Grand'Mère.

—So what is the name of this village where you live with your grandmother?

—No, the lady is my mother, not my grandmother. This is the village which is called Grand-Mère.

—Ah! Is it because of the rock that looks like an old lady's head?

—Yes, that's it. Have you seen it?

—Yes. And what is the region called?

—The Mauricie, said the mother.

While talking, the farmer made us eat by giving us a few spoonfuls of milk. Our geese were gently grazing in the back field. After a thousand thanks, the Great V left, following the Saint-Maurice River. The geese flew over the agglomeration of Trois-Rivières perched like an eagle on its cliffs. A large bridge, very high, crossed the St. Lawrence.



28

Montréal

—*Head southwest! We're going to fly over Montreal!* I shouted without further ado.

An hour later, we flew over the vast agglomeration of Montreal, which has half the population of La Belle Province. In the middle of the city stood a mountain surmounted by a cross. A chickadee who followed us obstinately told us that it was Mont-Royal. She added:

—*In 1642, Maisonneuve, founder of Montréal, feared that the St. Lawrence would overflow in the next time and that the ice of the spring break-up would demolish the city. He then vowed to carry on his shoulder a heavy wooden cross to the top of the mount, if the level dropped without difficulty.*

The Old City was very beautiful and the chickadee showed us a house in which Louis Cyr, a Montreal policeman who, in his time, was the strongest man in the world, had lived:

—*He could lift a wooden tray with four horses on it, place a cement barrel on his shoulder with one hand or pull 250 kg with one finger.*

It was astounding. A little further, the chickadee showed us from the tip of a wing, a large building:

—*You see this big house with a dome, it's the prison of Bordeaux. In the past, a black flag was hoisted on the dome whenever a capital execution took place.*

It was chilling. We would have liked to linger longer to listen to the brown-capped chickadee, but Blanche of Lac-Frontière had crumpled a humerus muscle and she had great difficulty flying. We had to land as fast as possible to let it rest. So we opened our eyes to look for a suitable place.

29

The Otvos family from Deux-Montagnes

The search for a resting ground lasted a good hour. We were flying over the city of Deux-Montagnes, when, unable to take it anymore, Blanche let herself go in gliding flight to a pretty house located in a residential area. There was no question of going any further. What to do? Were these people nice? Everyone was asking the question with trepidation. Suddenly the door opened and a young man exclaimed:

—Dad, a flock of wild geese landed in front of our house. I have the impression that there is a problem.

A man wearing goatee and glasses came out and approached Blanche who had been lying in the grass, trembling.

—One of the geese is sick, Patrick. She has the shoulder all swollen. You have to call the SPCA.

It was then that the man jumped when he heard a shrewd voice saying:

—We are sorry to disturb you, Mr. Montrealer. Maybe you can bring the sick goose home. With all the cats and dogs prowling, I'm afraid something bad will happen to us.

The man was looking for where this unreal voice could come from. He looked at the geese one after the other. He suddenly jumped with astonishment when he realized that it was not geese talking to him but small humans barely as long as his hand.

—Who... Who are you? asked the stranger, very surprised.

—*We are tomtes. My name is Caroline, and this is my brother Jacques, my sister Valerie, our guide goose Tania, and our travel companions with the jars Félix of the Île d'Orléans.*

—*Felix from Île d'Orléans? I seem to have heard that name somewhere, the man said, scratching his temple.*

—*It would surprise me very much, Mr. Montrealer, Jacques replied. Felix is a very discreet and rather shy jar. But what's your name?*

—*Lawrence. This is my son Patrick. My wife works as an Investment Advisor in a bank. Her name is Suzanne. She now works for the Guignolée. She will come later. We also have a son, Stephen, who is curate at the cathedral, and a daughter Sylvia, who holds a senior administrative position at McGill University. As for me, I give painting lessons to artists...*

The geese settled in the basement used as a bedroom for Patrick, and as a painting studio for the artist. Beautiful paintings lined the walls. The man was very talented. Finally, the SPCA truck arrived. A man and a woman full of softness took care of poor Blanche who was suffering greatly. She had dislocated her humerus joint. They were able to replace it by pulling the wing, which increased her suffering. Before leaving, they advised Lawrence to keep the goose at rest for at least two days. The master of the house went to get two large bags of garbage stuffed with fresh grass cut that afternoon. The geese were able to eat without taking unnecessary risks.

Towards the end of the afternoon came the lady of the house, Suzanne, as warm and friendly as her husband. She had been working all day to collect donations for the Guignolée: money, food or clothing for the poor. It was a Quebec custom. The family immediately sat down around a good meal prepared by the husband. They made us sit on the table itself. We were served our food in toy plates. We were so happy to get a taste of family life. We were missing our parents so much! Suzanne

generously offered to call Newfoundland to hear from them. We were all very moved. Everyone was crying with joy and tenderness. My father blamed me for being gone without warning them. I had a very hard time getting him to admit that he himself had suggested we move to British Columbia on geese. He replied that he was joking and that he thought it was just a childhood dream.

The Indian hermit was in prison for child abduction. They were going to try to get him released the next day but they feared that the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) was going to think they were crazy. They also told us that the furniture move was almost completed. They would have finalized their installation on the West Coast when we arrive in a city (in the great suburbs of Vancouver) called White Rock. My mother told us that she had gotten a job (by phone) at a certain Gabrielle Roy School in Surrey, and my father at Riverdale School. They had already bought on line a large house in White-Rock and they gave us the address: 15185 Columbia Avenue, White Rock (BC) V4B 1J2.



The Otvos family

30

The mysterious sugar shack

The evening went very well. Lawrence, very surprised to see that we could talk to the geese, took the opportunity to make a watercolor representing the twelve white geese lying in the basement. Suzanne had installed them on garbage bags so as not to dirty her carpet during the night. Then, to delight us, she offered to tell us a legend of Beauce, a region of Quebec Province. We welcomed this initiative with great joy.

—*This tale is called The Ghost of the Sugar Shack, she told us. You know how maple sugar and syrup are prepared, right?*

—*Yes, we boil the sap until the water evaporates, I replied.*

—*That is correct. And if we keep heating, all the liquid goes away and only the maple sugar remains. So, long ago, the boiler used to shut himself up six or seven weeks in his sugar shack, night and day.*

—*Why?*

—*Because it was necessary to feed the fire twenty-four hours a day and to constantly monitor syrup consistency. However, one night, a certain boilermaker, named Jean-Baptiste Riverin, heard a cry through the chimney of the sugar shack: «Ooouu ! Ooooouuuuu ! Oooooouuuuuuu !» Jean-Baptiste tried to convince himself that it was the wind. And he simply remained well locked in his sugar shack, with a double safety bar. He was beginning to reassure himself, when, an hour later, the noise started again: "Oooooooouuuu ! Ooooouuuu! Oooooouuuu! Jean-Baptiste summoned up his courage and opened the door. Nothing! No footprints in the snow around the sugar shack. He went back to work, his ear on the lookout. But suddenly, a sinister scratching came from the chimney, followed by the same*

cry: «Ooooooooooooooooouuuuuu! Ooooooooooooooooouuuu! Ooooooooooooooooouuuu!» ...

—He must have been so afraid! Valerie said.

—Yes, I am convinced of that.... So, totally panicked, he rushed outside and ran breathlessly towards the nearby village. Six long kilometers in the deep snow. He arrived exhausted but relieved to be among humans. All night, he couldn't help but think with fear about the fact that he was going to have to return to this nightmarish shack. What ghost was harassing him? What phantom was chasing him? Suddenly, the evidence hit him like a punch in the face. It was Philemon Gamache who wanted his money. Of course! Elementary, my dear Watson ! would say Sherlock Holmes.

I need to reveal, dear children, that Jean-Baptiste Riverin owed a large sum of money to Philemon Gamache. However, while preparing to repay it, Philemon had died in a trivial accident. A felled tree had fallen on the wrong side. And Jean-Baptiste couldn't help but remain silent about his debt. It seemed that Philemon's wife was unaware. No! Please! Do not think that he was dishonest and that he had decided never to pay off his debt. It wasn't as clear as that. But he procrastinated; even later... always later, hoping that he would not end up forgetting about his debt. No one admit to being dishonest. We always try to lie to ourselves. In any case, Jean-Baptiste Riverin did not have a clear conscience. If he thought about it, he was now certain that it was Philemon's voice screaming those awful "Ooooouu!"

At daybreak, therefore, he went to the wife of Philemon Gamache, who laboriously cared for her six children, and handed over the money to her. Thus, he could make his maple sugar in peace.

The widow was stunned. She was totally unaware of the existence of this debt and thanked Jean-Baptiste at length,

praising his honesty. She urgently needed this money to feed her large family! Freed from his debt, although a little sheepish, the distiller rushed to his sugar shack and restarted the boiling of the sap tank, happy to think that the ghost of Philemon would no longer bother him. Sure enough, the ghost stopped his scratching and screaming reproaches. When the sugars were finished, Jean-Baptiste set out, as at the end of spring, to clean his sugar shack, and when he dismantled the chimney, he found... a dead owl!

Furious with himself, he kicked the poor bird, and the corpse landed in a bush.

—In any case, he was honest, that's the important thing! I said.

The story over, we went to bed. Around one o'clock in the morning, Patrick, who could no longer sleep because of the smell given off by our twelve kind companions, discreetly got up to go to bed in the guest room above.



31

The RCMP Constable.

Blanche's joint had barely begun to deflate the next morning. The wild geese had to obey the veterinarian who had ordered to take one or, perhaps, two days of rest. I don't remember exactly. So, it was only the day after or three days later, in the morning, that the goose-guide gave the signal for departure after carefully examining Blanche and talking at length with us.

Our "goodbyes" were very moving, then the Great V headed west along the beautiful Ottawa River that Lemoyne d'Iberville and the *coureurs-de-bois* once followed to go to war on the shores of Hudson Bay or look for furs in the Pays-d'en-Haut. Perched high in the sky at approximately 6,500 m, some cirro-cumulus clouds had decided to contrast with the uniform azure blue of the sky. At all times, Blanche was asked if her shoulder was causing any pain, to the point that she ended up finding this excess of solicitude annoying.

—Thank you for worrying about my health, but I would very much appreciate it if you would stop continually asking me this question that tires me even more than flying. Thank you, my friends.

It was only after several hours of flight that the wild geese arrived over Ottawa, Canada's federal capital. Ottawa extends to the Quebec side under the name of Gatineau. We flew as low as we could over the Prime Minister's residence and then the residence of the Governor General of Canada. We even took the liberty of sitting in its park to admire it more closely. A strong Constable approached. He almost fell backwards when he heard Jacques' voice.

—What is your name?

—*Christian*, replied the bodyguard, after returning from his astonishment.

—*What is your function?*

—*I am the bodyguard of Madam Governor General.*

—*I too would like to work in the RCMP*, Jacques replied.

—*I don't want to be hurtful but you'll have to grow up a little, it seems to me.*

—*No problem, I'll be tall in a few weeks.*

—*So fast? I see that you are optimistic.*

—*You have a great job, and I'd like to do like you too. Goodbye, Christian, I think my friends can't wait to leave.*

—*Goodbye and... Good trip.*

We resumed our flight. A little further, incredibly, on electrical wires, ten little birds had written in musical notes the first stave of our national anthem *O Canada*... in our honor. A common loon from the region greeted us warmly to show us around the city. A small river cascaded into the Ottawa River:

—*Look at this fall, it looks like a bridal veil, or rather a light curtain.*

—*Yes*, the loonie replied. *This is why the river took the name Rideau.*[curtain]

—*Ah! It's curious!*

—*I am the symbol bird of the province of Ontario*, the loonie proudly announced, *and for that reason, it is my privilege to show you all the beauties of our nation's capital...*

—*What a great honour!* cut Valerie off admiringly.

—*You probably know that our good city of Ottawa is one of the most beautiful capitals in the world*, the loonie continued. *Keep*

the scenery everywhere: everywhere green spaces and golf courses, even on the Quebec side where you can see the Gatineau area. Here you can see the famous Parliament Hill, its magnificent buildings with green-green copper roofs...

—*As in Quebec City*, cried Valérie.

—*Really!* exclaimed the duck. *Has Quebec imitated us?*

—*Let us rather say that Ottawa followed the fashion of Quebec*, I replied to appease unnecessary rivalries. *Let's not forget that Quebec is four centuries old, while Ottawa is only a century and a half...*

—*Come on, let's go*, whistled the goose-guide, quite annoyed by the interest we had in this unknown loon-loon. *Direction: South!*

Saying this, the Great V moved away from the duck, a little offended by such casualness:

—*Thank you, thank you for your help*, we shouted, a little embarrassed by Tania's rudeness.

At an altitude of 300 m, our wild geese headed south-south-west, following the meanders of the Rideau Canal, which meander gracefully through the peaceful countryside.

The canal Rideau.



32

The legend of the Frog.

[Finally the geese landed in an islet that emerged
from the waters of the St. Lawrence.]

A goldfinch who knew the local history told us that we were at the summit of Fort Lévis; old French bastion located on a rock called Isle-Royale. The island had been submerged by the work of the St. Lawrence Seaway and only these few ruins of wall appeared above the waves.

—*Here you can sleep soundly*, the goldfinch told us.

What we had every intention of doing. The evening passed very peacefully. As usual, we made a small campfire to roast our marshmallows. It was during this pleasant evening that a bullfrog with plump shapes climbed on a rock and began to sing its senade: *Croaaa! Croaaa! Croaaa!* After a while, we invited this singer to join us, to silence him. To thank us for our generous hospitality, he insisted on telling us about his first years in this place:

—*When I was little, my father told me an anecdote from his own childhood. His parents had once brought him to the animal festival. It was happening in the middle of a forest, in a large clearing, near an open-pit mine. There were many activities like wild horse racing, swimming, gliding, hare races... It was in a similar meeting that took place the famous race between the tortoise and the hare reported by Jean de La Fontaine in his famous Fables. One of the most famous activities of these small Olympic Games was the Frog Race. Thousands of animals watched with great interest as a hundred frogs ran. They had to climb a very difficult slope. The slope was steep and everyone kept saying they would never make it. History has proved them right. One after another, the poor, discouraged frogs, abandoned this impossible ordeal. All but one. She persevered, indifferent to the*

audience's comments, and finally reached the top. Everyone was amazed that one of them had had the strength, courage and perseverance to reach the finish line. When asked questions about where she had found so much energy and moral and physical determination, it was discovered that she was deaf, and that her strength lay in her deafness. She had not heard the discouraging comments of the other animals; And because of this, she had persisted in her effort throughout the ordeal and had finally succeeded.

Very impressed by this story, I concluded:

—This is proof that we should not listen to others.

—At least to those who tell us that we will never achieve our dreams. For my part, I want to become an airline pilot and no one will discourage me even if my father advises me to be a dentist.



33

Toronto's skyscrapers

As soon as, the next day, the Great V resumed its cruising altitude, about 350 meters, our amazed eyes were able to embrace the grandiose spectacle of the *Thousand Islands*. The river widened into Lake Ontario. Dozens of fragments of thick green forest wanted to block the way to the tumultuous waves of the St. Lawrence. But the great river always managed to penetrate through obstacles. We all kept our mouths wide open in astonishment, unconcerned about the danger of swallowing mosquitoes. Then Lake Ontario came, as far as the eye could see. We flew just above the waves following the shore. You could also see the continuous flow of cars and trucks that paraded noisily on the highway next to it, like blood in an artery. Villages succeeded cities and we soon arrived at the immense conurbation of Toronto which caps the entire end of Lake Ontario on 150 km of shoreline. Everything was covered with houses, streets, asphalt, concrete and urban highways. The air was getting heavy, so much so that Tania decided to climb to an altitude of 600 meters in order to find some fresh air:

—I'm going up because if we don't take in enough oxygen, we'll be exhausted before the end of our normal flying day, she said.

Perched on the blue sky, we admired the giant agglomeration of Toronto. Suddenly, Valerie, who had an eagle's eye, exclaimed:

—Oh! look there in the distance, the tall building that stands as straight as a pole!

A very curious blue jay, who came to examine us more closely, told us in his clothesline scratchy voice that it was the *CN Tower*. One of the tallest structures in the world. It was

surrounded by a crowd of skyscrapers, descended to the city center to admire the imposing concrete spire. All these skyscrapers, which did not lack consideration in their respective quarters, facing the low houses and four-storey buildings, seemed from the sky to form a humble herd of small courtmen of more than modest size making a circle around a great lord.

—*It is better to be big and respected by small people than small and despised by the big ones*, I said.

The *Great V* turned due south to cross Lake Ontario, which, at this precise point, is Canadian on both sides. A good forty kilometers over this lake crisscrossed by small and large boats with multicolored flags.

—*Where are we going?* asked Valerie who had noticed the change of course.

Mariette who held my sister in a rump replied by turning her beak towards her:

—*To Niagara, Valerie.*



34

The legend of the Queen of the Spray

An hour later, the famous falls on the Niagara River impressed us greatly. The geese wanted to descend to the bottom of the cliff from which the water cataracts of Lake Erie fell, and we were all soaked by the spray. We took a break at the bottom of the abyss, on the roof of a hydroelectric plant, next to a duck a little shy and soaked like a... like a goose. Iris of Grosse-Isle thought he was cute. Always more enterprising than the others, she approached him to tell him that all this spray looked like a bridal veil. Understand who will! He initially replied timidly and then became emboldened:

—*I'll tell you "the legend of the Queen of the Spray".*

The geese and ourselves, always eager for legends, gathered around the wild duck which began with these words:

—*Everyone thinks it's a legend, but I know from good sources that it's a true legend... Long ago, the Ongiras Indian tribe lived in these places, along the Niagara River. For some unknown reason, the Indians were dying in large numbers and the Sages were of the opinion that the tribe should appease Hinoum, the God of Thunder, who lived with his two sons in a cave hidden behind the falls. The Indians began to send canoes loaded with game, fruit and flowers to this God's cave as gifts. But the epidemic showed no signs of abating. So, the Indians decided—as the Incas of Peru and the Mayans of Yucatan usually did—to sacrifice, once a year to Hinoum, God of Thunder, the most beautiful girl of the tribe*

—*Why not the most handsome young man?* I exclaimed.

The tiger duck looked at me in astonishment:

—*Caroline, do you mean it would be less criminal to kill a boy than a girl?*

—*No, Valerie explained diplomatically. They sacrificed what was most precious to them: a beautiful young girl.*

My sister's comment made me feel a little more comfortable.

—*Well, I continue, said the tiger duck. The most beautiful girl was chosen during a religious ceremony. One year, Lilaouala, the daughter of Grand Chief Eagle-Eye, was designated for this honor.*

—*This honor!!!* commented Jacques who was also starting to get angry. *What a great and priceless honor!*

—*Yes, that's normal,* the duck continued. *To defend the tribe in the countless wars against other Indian nations, it was always the boys who went to be killed. It was normal that they take only one girl a year to save the tribe against an epidemic...*

—*Okay, let's move on! Keep going, wild duck!* cut Jacques off.

—*On the day of the sacrifice, therefore,* resumed the vola- tile, *Lilaouala showed herself on the bank of the bubbling river, dressed in a beautiful robe in white doeskin. Her hair was crowned with lily flowers, as a sign of indifference to death. She climbed lightly into a white canoe of birch bark and rushed to her death into the abyss of the falls. But before he could be stopped, her heartbroken father jumped into the same canoe to follow her. When the two sons of the God Hinoum saw the wonderful creature, they rushed to Lilaouala and collected her in their arms.*

—*And the father?,* James asked.

—*The father? They forgot about him... Each of the two sons wanted to marry the beautiful girl. So, she agreed to marry the one who would reveal to her what evil was killing her people.*

The youngest of the brothers explained to her that a monstrous water snake was hiding in the chasm dug under the falls. Once a year, torn by hunger, the fabulous animal came out of the river, at night, secretly entered the village and poisoned the water. Thus, the following nights, he could devour the dead because this monster was a hardened necrophagous. Lilaouala immediately let her people know what was the cause of this mysterious epidemic that every year claimed so many innocent victims. Thus, brave warriors were able to ambush the monstrous snake and seriously wound it. Before dying, the giant snake bit a tree on one side of the river and wrapped its tail around another maple tree that had grown in Goat Island in the middle, forming a large curve. And that's how the Canadian horseshoe chute was created. Faithful to her promise, Lilaouala married one of the two sons of the God Hinoum, and she reigns since that time under the title of Queen of the Spray.



Niagara Falls in 1925

35

Pointe-Pelée

—*What a beautiful legend, I noticed. But you don't have a little more recent anecdote, duck?*

—*Yes, you just have to ask, young lady, replied the duck with his spatulate beak, waving his orange wings. Since you are francophones, I have an anecdote for you. On June 30th, 1859, a tightrope walker named Jean-François Gravelet, aka Blondin, became the first person to cross this powerful cataract on a cable stretched to a height equivalent to 16 floors.*

—*He must have been crazy, this man! Valerie exclaimed.*

—*Probably a little. But it's the crazy people that move the world forward... As for Blondin, the curious, numbering 40,000, were massed on both sides: Canadian and American, to see this Frenchman defy death. Blondin had left American territory. Halfway through, he took his momentum to perform a somersault backwards...*

—*Oh! It makes me dizzy just imagining this jump," Jacques added.*

—*La Marseillaise was played by a local fanfare. At one point, after hoisting a bottle of wine at the end of a rope, he poured himself a glass and enjoyed it. Then he finished his walk to Canada. After a reception at the Champagne, Blondin did the course again in reverse, but this time carrying a chair. In the middle of the cable, which was oscillating dangerously under the effect of the wind, he placed the chair in a balance on two legs and sat on it. He then stood on the chair, while it rested on one foot. People were clapping and shouting like insane, especially when he reached the United States. And then he took a liking to fame. Once he crossed with his feet in wooden buckets; On another occasion, he perched on stilts. He even made the*

trip blindfolded. One day, he carried his terrified impresario on his shoulders.

—*Astonishing*, I said.

This duck was inexhaustible. But the day was advancing, and, our curiosity satisfied, we asked the goose-guide to resume her flight to the West; this West that made us dream so hard. Tania de Montmagny immediately headed southwest along the Windsor highway. Suddenly, our goose guide abandoned the highway flight and moved closer to Lake Erie. She had seen a beautiful forest that seemed to come out of the water. The Great V prepared to land. It was a forest peninsula formed by majestic pines, and surrounded by beaches and rocks, with a camping ground, pleasure boats, canoes ... A true earthly paradise.

—*What is this point of earth called?* Jacques asked a young boy who was playing in the sand, fifteen meters below.

The teenager raised his head, and without appearing the slightest astonished at this voice that came from heaven, replied:

—*This is Pointe-Pelée. You can come. There is no danger for you as it is also a bird sanctuary.*

It was a unique blend of inextricable jungle that gushed out of the swamps, sometimes pierced by clearing and savannah. All on the edge, beautiful sandy beaches built or destroyed according to atome fantasy. This complex flora housed thousands of animal species.

—*But why is the climate so mild here?* Valerie asked a golden eagle.

—*Dear child*, replied the bird with a somewhat condescending look, *Pointe-Pelée is the southernmost region of Canada. It lies at the latitude of Northern California. It is Canada's smallest national park; but what majesty. This is where I live and I don't*

want to live anywhere else because no other place is worthy of me!

Everywhere, hundreds of species of flowering or flowerless plants, were as beautiful as possible to attract our admiration. The predominant tree in places was the hackberry of Canada. Its vine fruits mingled with Virginia climbing plants, with giant ivy that cascaded branches. What an incomparable beauty! Water lilies came out of the water, even plumes of hops and Mexican plant exiled until now.

—I knew everything was beautiful here, replied Tania de Montmagny, swallowing a few blades of grass. A monarch butterfly told me.

That evening, we didn't settle for fruit, egg or raw fish as usual. We found a few slices of ham and a bag of small marshmallows abandoned by hikers on a picnic table.

—These are very generous people, Jacques said. They thought of us.



36

The Ghost of the Old Soldier

At nightfall, a bonfire sparkled in the darkness. The whole fantastic forest had gradually fallen asleep, and we appreciated the calm and serenity of the darkness that enveloped us. We talked about our friends left behind in Quebec and Newfoundland, and all about our dear parents who had to mope with concern for our safety. Shortly before midnight, we slipped out of the wild geese protective circle to walk on the beach. No sooner had we walked a few meters on the fine sand, than we noticed in the light of the full moon, a shadow sitting on a tree trunk deposited there by a storm. The stranger was curiously dressed in a large jacket with military uniform seps.

—*Hello sir*, we whispered, in order to coax the figure. A shadow is always suspicious.

The man raised his head as he held in his hands. He searched for a moment where these greetings came from before finally seeing the tiny beings that we were.

—*Hello kids. You are very small!... Oh I apologize...* he said in a gloomy voice.

—No, don't apologize, sir, Valerie replied. *This is normal. We are indeed very small. But your remark does not insult us, because that's our desire. We chose to be different from others. But you, sir, what are you doing there, in the dark, with your head in your hands. You look very sad.*

—*Oh! that's a strange and long story. But if you insist, I'll tell you.*

—*Yes, sir, tell us your story.* I insisted. *We love imaginary and even implausible legends, as well as authentic stories. Our dad always told us stories before we fell asleep, and we have wonderful memories of them.*

—Well, if you insist, I'll tell you. This is a true story. In fact, despite appearances, I am not a living being. I'm a ghost... the ghost of an English soldier who fought in 1764 against the warriors of the Great Indian Chief Pontiac.

—You mean that you are only an image, a specter? Jacques said, trying to touch the man's big leather shoe. To his surprise, his fingers palpated only sand. This man was truly immaterial.

—Wow! my brother cried.

—Don't be afraid, children. I'm not dangerous because I don't have a body. I couldn't hurt you, even if I wanted to... I'm so happy to be able to talk to human beings. The story why I am here, alone, was at the end of the Seven Years' War. The Indians wanted the French to come back to Canada and they revolted against us... Lieutenant Cuyler had been ordered to supply Fort Notre-Dame-du-Detroit, besieged by Chief Pontiac's insurgent Indians. Cuyler had left Fort Niagara on the 13th of May 1763 with a convoy of provisions and ammunition. He had embarked at Fort-Schlosser, just upstream of the falls with a reinforcement of 96 soldiers and tons of supplies...

—You remember all these details? I asked.

—All! As if this tragedy had happened today... Our convoy followed the north shore of Lake Erie without seeing a living soul. On May 28th, we docked right here, on this beach of Pointe-Pelée to spend the night... The boats pulled dry, we've prepared the bivouac. Two soldiers moved away to collect dead wood. Suddenly an Indian appeared, grabbed one of the two soldiers by the hair and put him out of action with a single blow of a tomahawk. The other man fled towards us, to raise the alarm with his horrified cries... The Indians who attacked us were Ouyandots. They had been ambushed for several days to intercept English military reinforcements and merchant ships. Faced with this aggression, our chief Cuyler immediately arranged his men in a semicircle around the canoes. A troop of

brave warriors immediately assaulted us, opening a terrible fire on us. Our response was no less furious...

—My God, it must have been horrible, I whispered, trembling. Keep going, sir. Carry on!

—So the Indians rushed to the center of our line of defense. And at that moment, I made a terrible mistake... I dare not admit it... The man said, sobbing. I am too ashamed.

—But yes, tell us. It will relieve you. Don't cry. Everyone can make mistakes. Admitted fault is half forgiven!

—I wish!... Well, I ran away shouting, "Run for your life!" ... And that caused panic in our troops. To my cry, all our soldiers dispersed before the Indians... Seized with a sudden and thoughtless fear, they threw away their guns, thoughtlessly, and rushed to the boats to put them back afloat... Through my fault... But the Indians were following us closely... Only five boats were able to get away from the shore, full of terrified and unarmed soldiers... Cuyler himself jumped into the water and hoisted himself into a boat... The Indians hurriedly put two canoes afloat to set off after us... Three of our boats were recaptured without relent, because, as I said, our soldiers were totally disarmed because they had recklessly thrown away their weapons... Only two canoes, including Cuyler's boat, managed to escape... They rowed all night, and, in the morning, exhausted, they were able to take refuge on an islet... About forty soldiers, some wounded, had massed in these two boats... The others, about sixty, were captured or killed.

—It's terrible, Valerie groaned. How many men have lost their lives?

—Sixty soldiers... because of me.

—Sixty English soldiers and how many Indians? I said.

—I don't know,... maybe just five or six.

—*Why do you just say "just"?* James asked.

—*That's a good question. Maybe because they were our enemies.*

—*But they also had children, wives and relatives to mourn them!* commented Jacques.

—*That's right... But I hadn't thought about it until now,* the soldier said.

—*What does this battle have to do with your presence here tonight?*

—*For my cowardice which led to the destruction of almost all my companions, the other dead prevented me from entering paradise. I can only be admitted when I have spent 100,000 nights moping on this beach, the very scene of my crime...*

We shouted together:

—*100,000 nights! That's a long time. How long do you have to wait?*

—*That's almost 275 years. I only have thirty years left to wander on this earth. After which I will have peace and eternal rest because my comrades have forgiven me.*

It was one o'clock in the morning when we left the poor soldier to his sad fate to go and sleep under the wing of our wild geese. Tania of Montmagny, Genevieve and Mariette kindly opened a wing to allow us to lie warm in their fine down, and to sleep thinking about this long punishment... So many more years in the darkness of the night on a stranded tree trunk!



37

The legend of Pelée Island

The geese woke us up a little before daybreak, and we had to make a considerable effort to open our eyes and go soak in the cool water of Lake Erie. The sun was not yet quite visible, but it could be felt approaching the liquid horizon as stratus and dark liquid masses began to turn pink. Tania of Montmagny whistled her ritual phrases:

—*Come on, stand up, everyone! Fortune only smiles to those who get up early!*

—*The sun will boil the water of the lake and we can drink a hot chocolate or a cup of coffee,* joked Valerie.

Thousands of birds of all colors sang together to celebrate the arrival of the star of the day: the sun.

—A golden eagle over there, I shouted... A peregrine falcon, here on the tree...

The spectacular silence was broken only by the song of birds, by the discreet blowing of the wind of the distant prairies and by the murmur of the waves. In the end, in a split second, a ray of sunlight burst from the horizon to flood the forest with a torrent of light. The dark leaves of the trees began to move, to live.

—*Oh! Look at the trees!* Jacques shouted. *They change color! It's unbelievable!*

Quite amazed, we realized that what we took for dark leaves were butterflies with folded wings. They covered everything. In a few seconds, the forest was on fire with orange blazes. Thousands and thousands of butterflies frantically flapped their wings together to dry them from the morning dew to the gentle warmth of the first rays of sunshine; thousands of

monarch butterflies to whom the flame of the sun had just transmitted life. Suddenly, all the vegetation was colored with orange tones and began to throb with vitality. A beaver told us that it was at Pointe- Pelée that migratory monarchs made a final stop before bravely set off through the dangerous waters of Lake Erie.

—They are going to Mexico, the beaver added. They want to spend the cold season in this hot country; like rich Canadians. They waited for this little breeze from the north that helps them easily cross the lake. For the lake is very wide; too wide for their fragile wings, and this point is the narrowest.

What a prodigious sight! We had a hard time snatching it up for lunch with some local ducks who advised us to fly over the nearby islet which was also called Pelée-Island. In this islet, they said, is a very steep rock called the Rock of Houllda.

—According to legend, said an old duck who seemed to know in detail all the gossip in the region, Houllda was a beautiful French-Indian girl. She had fallen madly in love with a young adventurer passing through. Despite his promise of marriage, he disappeared and never returned. Heartbroken, Houllda has taken the habit of climbing the rocky cliff trying to catch a glimpse of her lost love... And one day she fell. Some claim that her fall was intentional, but I do not think so. Today, it seems that if you listen carefully to the waves of Lake Erie breaking at your feet, you can hear the sobs of Houllda.

How moving this story is! I hope it's just a legend. Why are there so many sad stories in such a wonderful country, Valerie cried, wiping with the back of her hand some diamonds that beaded from her eyes.

38

The Underground Railroad

Twenty minutes later, our Great V took off to discover new horizons. From the sky, I pointed to Pelée Island and the Rock of Houlida. It was the southernmost point of Canada. The flock of geese rounded the southern Ontario Peninsula and made a determined commitment to the Detroit River. The day was very hot and, to swim and cool off, we asked Tania to stop at an island that, from the sky, looked like a chop. A double-crested cormorant revealed the name:

—*You are in Île-à-la-Pêche! What are you going to do?*

—*We want to swim in the water of Lake St. Clair.*

—*Poor you! Don't do that, my friends! You better not! This beautiful Nature here is so polluted that you could die.*

—*You, cormorant. You likes to talk about everything, said Valerie, you must know someone who would like to inform us about an original fact of this area?*

—*For this, the double-crested cormorant replied, waving its yellow beak, I'll only ask your question to myself. Because I am certainly the most qualified person in the land for proven gossip, the most secret gossip, and even the most lying gossip.*

Valerie had a little smile that the cormorant has taken for admiration.

—*Well! So, what do you have to tell us about this country?*

—*Of all that I know about this region, I could tell you that Windsor was formerly called La-Pointe-des-Pins and that it was in this city that the "Underground Railway" arrived.*

—*The what?*

—*The Underground Railway. It was the code name of an escape network of American slaves.*

—*Dear cormorant, you are inexhaustible, Tania cut off. You are truly a valuable guide. And this little rest allowed us to relax our wings. The children stretched their legs and we all enriched our minds with your great knowledge. Thank you dear cormorant. It was a real pleasure to chat with you and especially to listen to you...*

The cormorant understood that it was time to go. He greeted us by shaking his egrets and took flight. The island was abandoned. We decided to light a small fire to camp on-site.

—*Let's make a little pile of wood! Valerie suggested.*

Everyone was busy gathering a few twigs of dead wood. Soon flames sparkled in the peaceful night. Suddenly, the geese reported that a canoe had landed a man on the island. A large beam of light began to dance in the night like a panicked bat. Finally, the light came to us. Soon the immense black shadow of the man cut across the yellowish sky of the Detroit metropolitan area. He was wearing a cap and holding in his left hand his very threatening baton lamp, and a dangerous barrel gun on his right. He could be heard whispering phrases in which there were words such as: "*fire*", "*flames*", "*tramps*", "*prison*", and other expressions that I cannot spell. We were scared. It was probably a policeman, but, when in doubt, one did not dare to utter a single word for fear that it would be a bandit. You never know. Don't judge a book by its cover. Moron-the-bittern and Trickster-the-Shrike still haunted our minds. The geese were silent. They pretended to be asleep. The light beam swept several times the bushes, the flames, the surroundings, the geese and the trees... The man probably wondered who could have lit this fire. After hesitating, he raised his right foot high to crush our little home with his heavy leather sole. That's when I cried out:

—*No, sir, please do not destroy our bonfire!*

In surprise, the powerful individual, perched in balance on one foot made such a leap that he fell heavily on the ground. He stood up in a flash and searched the darkness of his beam of light, shouting:

—*Who is this? Stand up! Police!*

—*Oh, you scared us, sir. We thought you were a bandit.*

The man jumped again violently, getting angry behind his flashlight:

—*Where are you? Get up and put your hands up or I'll shoot!*

—*No, don't shoot, Mr. Policeman. We are children... Children?*

—*Yes, we are tomtes, minuscule beings... Send your light to the foot of the tree next to you...*

—*Where?*

—*Yes, by that, more to the left,... again... There! See me?...*

Caught in the dazzling beam of light of his electric torch like a butterfly in a net, I waved my hand so that he noticed me. He finally distinguished me, and after a few seconds of astonishment, exclaimed:

—*Wow!... I can't believe it!... So small... So tiny... That's impossible!...*

—*Mr. Policeman, stop saying that. You'll give me inferiority complexes. We are average Canadians, and we travel on the backs of many geese. There is nothing extraordinary about that...*

—*Nothing out of the ordinary? There is nothing extraordinary! ... Incredible!*

Dear reader, I don't want to dwell too long on the astonishment of the poor police officer. It took him a good twenty

minutes at least to come to his senses. He did not dare to alert his superiors by radio for fear of letting them believe that he had watered his supper a little too much... with something other than water. So, he didn't say anything. Jacques and Valerie joined me to explain the situation to the unknown.

860

**FUGITIVE SLAVES
IN CANADA.**

THE ELGIN SETTLEMENT.

THERE WILL BE A PUBLIC MEETING IN
FREE SOUTH LEITH CHURCH,
ON
THURSDAY EVENING NEXT, AT 7 O'CLOCK,
TO HEAR STATEMENTS FROM
THE REV. WILLIAM KING,
formerly a Slave Owner in Louisiana, United States, and
WILLIAM H. DAY, ESQ. M.A.,
A Deputation from Canada, whither the Thirty Thousand have fled, escaping
from American Slavery.

The Rev. WILLIAM KING liberated his own Slaves, and in this respect
is mentioned in Mrs Harriet Beecher Stowe's work, "Dred," as "Clayton."

As this is a work of general benevolence—simply to give the Bible to
those in Canada who have heretofore been deprived of it—it is hoped that
there will be a large attendance at the Meeting.

Leaves, 2505 November 1850. Harrell & Ryerson, Printers, Leith.

39

The King and his four wives

Finally, the policeman decided to let us spend a good evening around our bonfire and he even ate with us. He told us that he himself had three children our age, but much bigger, of course. He stayed at least until midnight because, before leaving, he offered to tell us a local legend. We agreed with shouts of joy. He began:

—Once upon a time, in this region, there was a polygamous king who had four wives. As happens in such cases, he did not like them all in the same way. He loved the first one so much that he showered her with gifts, the most expensive clothes... But he knew that if he ever died, she would forget him very quickly. He also loved his second wife very much; He was so proud of her that he showed her to everyone. His third wife was patient and loving to him. Whenever he wanted to confide his worries to someone or receive encouragement to get through a difficult time, he knew he would find a sympathetic and even complacent ear in her. He understood that she usually gave him self-serving advice because she sought to please him to keep his favors. But he loved her anyway. His last wife, on the other hand, left him perfectly indifferent. He did not like her and even preferred to forget her. For, when he consulted her, she often reproached him appallingly. Worst of all, he knew she was right. He hated her even more for this reason and did everything he could to forget her. He was very suspicious of her because he knew that if he had listened to her from the beginning, he would never have become king. He kept her as his wife, hoping that she would one day die and leave him alone.

Anyway, what happens in most cases happened. It wasn't her who died first... but him. Having fallen very ill, he knew that he had little time to live. But it is always difficult to die alone.

Especially when you're selfish. He would have preferred to go in a group. It seemed to him that it would be easier. So, he summoned his first wife and told her:

—I'm going to die, my favorite beautiful woman. Will you die with me and follow me to the grave?

Outraged by such a request, his first woman vehemently objected:

—No way, Sire. Are you losing your mind... Evolve! We are no longer in the time of "sati", in the time when the Indians burned widows at the stake of their husbands, and even less in the time of Sardanapale⁵!

The king was all upset although Sardanapale was completely unknown to him. He then asked the same question to his second wife who came to wish him good health and tell him that she loved him so much:

—Beautiful darling, your husband is going to die. Do you agree to go with him to the other world?

—I can't believe it! she replied in English, because she was of English origin and mechanically returned to this language under the effect of emotion. Sire, we married for the better and for laughter, not to die.

—We got married for better and for worse, beautiful darling! corrected the king in the midst of the depression.

—I am sorry, Sire, but I have misunderstood my commitments. In my mind, it was "for laughter." You must find someone else to follow you into the Beyond.

⁵ Sardanapale, also called Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, wanting to escape the Medes who besieged him in Babylon, was burned with all his women and many children on a large pyre erected in his palace. The painter Delacroix made a painting of it, Joncières an opera and Byron a tragedy.

Furious, the king wanted to explain to her that "for laughter" meant nothing and that it was only a cheating on her part. But his anger raised so much his blood pressure that his doctors advised him to abandon the sterile debate, for fear of risking a heart attack. The monarch therefore summoned his third wife, sure that she would agree to follow him.

—My dearest Princess Royal, now is the time to prove your love to me.

—You know, dear Sire, that I alone love you more than your other three wives combined. Every time you asked me something, I answered favorably. Ask and your request is accepted in advance.

—I was certain that it was you who loved me more than anyone else. Do you agree to die with me?

To his delight, she agreed:

—Sire, I am perfectly happy to die with you because you are my whole life. So, I accept on one condition: to save you from a terrible agony, I want a soldier to kill you now with a sword, and kill me immediately after you. So, I will be sure that you will not suffer.

—Oh! said the surprised king.

—Yes, Sire. For you, the sacrifice will be insignificant, since, in any case, you will die in the hour that comes. For me who is fifty years younger than you, it is a great sacrifice, but I accept it with pleasure for your happiness.

The king asked to think about it before making his decision. The proposal seemed generous on the part of his wife, but he found it difficult to sacrifice a few minutes of his own life. He was still thinking when his chamberlain offered to summon his fourth wife.

—You are right, chamberlain. I had forgotten, that one. Bring her in. She may accept to die without any absurd precondition.

The fourth wife arrived. The king received her rather coldly because he had always been suspicious of her. She was thin and covered in rags, so malnourished and ignored by her royal lord.

—I'm sorry, my wife, he told her. I have always neglected you. Poor you. And now I come to ask you to accompany me in death. It's unfair and if I listened to myself, I wouldn't ask you anything.

—My handsome Sire. I am so happy to follow you. To be honest, I will even pursue you in the Afterlife if you wish... and even if you don't want to, for that matter.

What this man did not know was that his first wife was his body. His second his property, wealth and social status; his third one was his relatives and friends. As for his fourth wife, the only one who would accompany him after his death, his conscience and his soul. They would follow him, even if he didn't want them, wherever he went. His fourth wife is the most faithful wife because she is there, even if all our lives we have neglected our conscience and our soul, or tried to destroy them.

The story was interesting, but we were tired, and that night we went to bed as soon as the policeman was gone. As he walked away in his canoe, we heard his radio screaming in the silence of the night:

—John Acacia, where are you? John Acacia, what do you do? John Acacia, answer right now. Respond immediately...

40

Lake Superior

(For the next few days, the children and geese walked along the shores of Lake Huron and then Lake Superior.)

Around mid-afternoon, we flew over a beautiful all-white yacht that, like us, was sailing west. There was a child on board playing around a blue pool. I asked Tania of Montmagny to go down fifteen meters and I shouted:

—*Where are you going?*

The child raised his head:

—*We are going to Windigo, in the Isle Royale National Park, in the extreme west of Lake Superior!*

—*Does your dad work there?*

—*My dad works here in this yacht. He creates work for others. He earns a lot of money and thus gets many other people to work. In fact, he runs his companies from the yacht.*

—*You have a good life. And where do you go to school?*

—*I don't go to school. I have a teacher here who makes me study. And then I use the internet a lot. I study on line.*

—*Oh that's great! You're very lucky!*

—*That's what everyone tells me, but I'd rather go to a regular school to have friends, like kids my age. Here I have no comrades except my dog Coco.*

—*And why don't your parents put you in a school on the ground.*

—*Because they love to travel and they don't want to be away from me. And then also, they are afraid that bandits will kidnap me to demand ransom or to kill me.*

—It is true that rich or poor, everyone has their own life difficulties.

The geese were now too far ahead for me to be heard. So, we stopped talking to the poor rich child who was suffering from loneliness in his gilded prison. The seascape continued to pass before our eyes. We did not fail to scrutinize each boat, always hoping to see a child, with whom we could exchange a few words. We tried with a few adults, but usually they didn't respond. They looked around them, towards the sky with gestures of disbelief, without being able to think that these children's voices came from the white geese.



41

The castaways

All along the north shore of Lake Superior, the brave Trans-Canada Highway made its way through the almost impenetrable woods of the Boreal Forest. This road obstinately pierced trenches or even tunnels in the toughest rocks, perseveringly bypassed those that refused to let themselves be entered, allowed itself a well-earned rest in the cultivated plains and prosperous valleys, rocked in the petrified waves and hillsides of the Canadian Shield like a surfer on the swell of an ocean. The Trans-Canada skimmed lakes that were too deep, forded swamps, and jumped rivers on a wooden or metal bridge. But this road was not alone, a railway followed it faithfully. They sometimes drifted apart like an old couple who wanted to keep their independence, but then moved closer when the obstacle was overcome and the divergence forgotten.

Observing from the sky this valiant road, the longest in the world, I thought of the *voyageurs* who, in their large canots-de-Maistre very heavily loaded, had to row 16 to 18 hours a day. They had to follow the shores of the great lakes as closely as possible because sudden and virulent storms were not uncommon in these inland seas.

Suddenly, we noticed black smoke coming from a tiny motorboat. At my request, Tania descended to five or six meters from the waves to take a closer look at the situation. A man and a woman were fighting a fire. They filled buckets with water in the lake and threw them on the flames but without much result.

—*Did you send an SOS message?* Jacques shouted.

The terrified man turned around, looking for where the voice could come from, and uttered a random response:

—No, our radio isn't working and my phone battery is discharged. We're going to die.

—But who are you? pursued a woman's voice. Are you an angel who tells us about heaven? Yet we are not dead yet!

—No, we are travelers on the backs of geese...

The two strangers made a face that betrayed their disbelief.

—I think we're starting to lose our minds, honey. Let us not deal with these voices. These are hallucinations!

In all haste, the geese turned around to find, a few minutes later, the big white yacht of the millionaire:

—A few kilometers in front of you a small boat is in distress, it burns, I shouted to the child. Can you go and warn your parents? They need help. We are counting on you.

The child disappeared into steerage. Soon the ship turned slightly on its way to head towards the burning boat. The Great V then returned to the small speedboat in difficulty to shout to the weeping lady that help was coming soon.

—Oh, thank you, thank you so much for your help, but I think it's too late for my husband who seems to be having a heart attack. He's going to die because he'd have to be in a hospital within 30 minutes... Anyway our speedboat will sink in less than five minutes.

The geese immediately left in the direction of the yacht about to reach the castaways. The child's father phoned the coastal towns of Schreiber and Nipigon asking them to send a helicopter to transfer the dying man to hospital. He gave the position of the castaways. The helicopter arrived at the scene of the fire just five minutes after the yacht. And the patient was able to arrive at the hospital in Nipigon before the thirteenth fateful minutes were up.

42

Snow White and Her Companions

Evening was starting to fall when we landed in Silver Islet. Very close to the peninsula of the Sleeping Giant. At the edge of a park, the garden of a house was decorated with eight beautiful earthenware personages that represented Snow White and the seven dwarfs. They were splendid, well decorated with bright colors. They were about 80 cm tall. As for Snow White, with her 160 cm, she was eight times taller than us. The equivalent of 14 meters compared to a man of normal height. I felt like I was at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. I immediately went to get my brother and sister to make them admire these beautiful statues. About ten minutes later, we came back in the middle of all these garden gnomes. We tried to guess the names of each character.

—*This one is Prof, this one is Joyful*, said one.

—*Here is Grumpy. Atchoum is there and Simplet here*, said the other.

Suddenly, to everyone's surprise, Sleeper began to speak:

—*Hello friends, thank you for visiting us.*

We used to surprise people with our size, and in fact I liked to read the surprise on their faces when they discovered that we were so small. But I must admit that, this time, it was ourselves who were surprised. I first jumped sideways as if I had been stung by a hornet, then I looked at Sleeper with the same stunned look as if he had been a ghost.

—*You're surprised, aren't you? Did you think you were the only surprising people in the country?*

—Yes! Absolutely, I replied. I would never have believed that garden dwarves could be living people.

—You call us "dwarves" but you are much smaller than us! Of course we are alive and well. Believe me. But we only move at night. Me, I am lucky to be able to speak during the day. I am an exception.

—You are a real privileged, a lucky guy... You are all very beautiful... And Snow White is even more beautiful!

—Yes you're right. That's why we're all in love with her.

My father told me that it is because you love her, that she can have you wash, comb, brush your teeth, work, clean the house, do the les- sive, cook,...

—Yes, he is right, my dear. ?

—... Caroline.

—... my dear Caroline. We are all old boys, used to doing it as we please and it was not easy at first. Get closer to her and you'll see that it is even more beautiful up close.

—More beautiful up close?

—Yes, stand right in front of her, very close to her.

You'll see...

—But I can see it very well from here.

—No, no, stand near her.

—You must be bored, always motionless in this garden. Even if the site is very beautiful.

—Don't believe that. Every night we go for a walk in the national park.

Suddenly, we heard: Hooouuuuu! Hooouuuuu! Hooouuuuu!

—What is it? I said all frightened.

—*He is a Grand Duke.*

—*What kind of bird?*

—*It is a great owl, a fearsome nocturnal raptor. It eats everything it can catch in its powerful talons: ducks, geese, buzzards, mice, even domestic cats, rabbits; and also skunks.*

—*It doesn't fear their smell?*

—*No, Caroline! You are in danger. He can catch you too. Get closer to Snow White. Place yourself at her feet right in front of her. She will protect you against the dangerous Grand Duke who flies in such silence that you will not hear this bird approach and dive on you.*

—*And this eagle owl has built a nest in this forest?*

—*He didn't build anything at all. He simply forcibly occupied the nest of a red-tailed hawk.*

—*Do you want to suggest that everyone is afraid of these Grand Dukes? No one dares to chase them away?*

—*Not only is everyone afraid of them, but they are protected by the hunting law. Everyone is afraid of their big horns and yellow eyes staring at you until you look down.*

—*My father often said that laws protect the perpetrators too much and not enough the victims.*

—*It's a bit excessive but there is some truth. As for the eagle owls, crows sometimes gather to scare away those who threaten their young. Go stand in front of Snow White's feet. He'll probably attack you and take you away. You're so small, Caroline, that he won't even have to chew you to swallow you.*

—*Brooooo! You give me chills. But what do you do at night, when everyone is sleeping?*

—*I go to my ADGG meetings.*

—*What is ADGG?*

—*The Association for the Defense of Garden Gnomes.*

—*What is the purpose of this association?*

—*You're curious Caroline. This association fights for gardens to no longer be decorated with dwarves. Dwarves should be respected like all human beings and not made them subjects of amusement. It is depreciative. Come before Snow White's feet...*

At Sleeper's insistence, I went before the feet of the great Snow White, and then I heard a loud cry. It was Jacques:

—*Please be careful Caroline, the statue falls on you! Careful!*

I jumped sideways and Snow White fell like a mace on a flowerpot. The statue shattered into several pieces and, guess who I saw, amid the earthenware fragments... Guess!... I saw appear, like a ghost... this scoundrel Moron-the-Bittern. This bandit had hidden in the statue of Snow White to make her fall on me and kill me. Dear reader! I was completely stunned. Full of suspicion, I turned back to Sleeper who had insisted so much so that I go under the statue of Snow White and I heard the statue of Sleeper scream:

—*Fool! Moron-the-Bittern, idiot! You missed your shot. I told you to stumble upon her and not miss her. Fool! I can't trust you. Grab her and slit her throat instead of standing on the ground. Catch her before the geese arrive...*

43

The Philosopher Wanderer

Before Moron-the-Bittern, stunned by the fall, could come to his senses, Francette who was on guard duty, alerted everyone. The twelve geese, menacing beaks pointed at their foe, came to the rescue like a squad of Canadian soldiers who were protecting citizens attacked by thieves. The two mean birds only had time to fly away. We really had the fear of our lives that night, and sleep did not lend us its compassionate wing until three or four o'clock in the morning.

Fortunately, that evening, we met a vagrant, a homeless man who was coming to sleep under the stars in this National Park. He recognized that it was his wrong choices in his life, his own faulty choices, that had brought him to this desperate state of abandonment. The rangers let him stay in the Park because they did not want to add unnecessary humiliations to the harshness of the poor man's life. He pushed a grocery cart full of old rags, plastic bags and many empty bottles that he recycled endlessly. He made a small campfire, taking great care not to endanger the forest. We took the opportunity to speak to him. He was very kind and invited us to share his meager meal. We toasted marshmallows. Valerie asked, pointing her tiny index finger at the empty bottles:

—Did you drink all that, sir?

—No, not at all. In fact, I don't drink, because alcohol hurts my stomach. But I contribute to the common good by picking up all the bottles of soda and beer that people carelessly throw into nature. By working from morning to night, I manage to forget my sad situation without having to take refuge in the

drunkenness and delirium of alcohol or drugs, as some other unconscious vagrants do.

—You are doing ecological work! But in the evening, when you find yourself alone in your solitude, what do you do to distract yourself?

—I invent tales and legends. Reading and writing are good ways to escape, even from high-security prisons. And then I feel useful to my fellow humans. It prevents me from despising myself and destroying me in alcohol.

—Recycling bottles also limits waste, I added.

—You're right, children, he replied. All those who want to be useful to the common good can do it. You just have to find a niche. And so, when I die, I'll have the satisfaction of having done my best...

—Where do you sleep? Do you have people who love you?

—I sleep where I can, anywhere, and as a result, no one loves me anymore. I go where my pierced shoes take me. I had a nice and beautiful family, too, but I started drinking and destroyed it... I demolished the happiness of all those who loved me... As a result, everyone has abandoned me, because, by my behavior, I bring bad luck to all those I love.

—You mean that when you die, when you breathe your last by the wayside, no one will take your hand to comfort you?

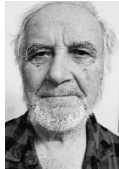
—No, but I don't want to worry about my death, because when I'm dead, I won't worry anymore. As long as I'm alive, I have no reason to worry about my death. Death is sad only for those who remain; and not for those who die.

—That makes sense to me. You are a true philosopher.

—I am not a philosopher but this idea was said by a great Greek philosopher named Epicurus of Samos. You know that the Greeks are the founders of Western philosophy?

—*Yes, and democracy too*, Jacques replied.

—*Absolutely. The great advantage we have is that we don't know WHEN we will die...*



44

The smart horse

—In this regard, I would like to tell you a little legend that took place in that region, at least if I believe those who told me.

—Oh, yes! we answered from a single voice.

—Here is my story... A farmer had a workhorse. One of those big Percherons that served the noble knights of the Middle Ages in their wars to uselessly demonstrate their bravery...

—They would have done much better to show their courage by working for the good of all, Valerie said.

—You are right... This horse, therefore, who had perhaps heard of these accounts of futile tournament to amaze and impress the ladies of the Court, considered himself very happy to do a useful work. He pulled heavy wooden carts and steel plough for tilling the soil, dragged large, felled timbers to the river, tore off the stumps that clung desperately to the earth with all their roots, operated the pulley to lift heavy burdens... In a word, this horse had become essential to the farmer. But one day, this great Percheron fell into a very deep, very wide and totally dry well. If the well had been narrower the horse might have been able to climb leaning on both sides of the wall, but this was not the case. Impossible to get out alone! The good horse, who was intelligent like all Percherons, called his master to his help. Believing himself essential to this man, he thought that the latter would do the impossible to save him. But the master quickly realized the insurmountable difficulty in getting the animal out of the well. He thought that, all things considered, his Percheron was getting old and that it was a good opportunity to buy a younger one. So, he decided to get rid of this animal by burying it in the

well. He immediately began to throw dirt and stones on the head and back of the poor animal...

—Oh the despicable villain, the heartless ungrateful! I cried, shocked.

—After a few hours, continued the wanderer without noting the comment, the master looked into the well and what he saw surprised him. Instead of lying down at the bottom and agreeing to let himself die, the brave horse shook its head and back every time it received a shovelful of stones. It hurt him but never mind, it was better than the despair of death. The horse did not want to accept his sad fate and when the dirt was falling on his feet, he climbed higher and, as a result, he ended up at the edge of the well. He then came out of the hole and instead of indulging in hatred towards his owner, he said to himself: "If I hate my selfish master and if I refuse to work for him, he will sell me and I may fall with an even more wicked master who will send me to a horse butcher shop (in those days people used to eat horse meat). What hurt me the most was that I expected my master to be generous and grateful to me because I was doing him a favor. I had better forget his selfishness and my grudge, continue to give without waiting for a return and do what I can. Thus I will never be disappointed by my master's ingratitude."

—What a brave and intelligent horse! said Jacques.

—You're right, the old man continued. This Percheron survived only because he did not surrender to discouragement, hatred and resentment.

—This is how I will do in my life, I commented.



45

The legend of the White Horse of the Red River

(The next evening, the geese flew over a small river that headed was heading to Winnipeg. In the late afternoon, upon arriving over St. Boniface, Tania decided to land.)

Shortly before arriving in St. Boniface (Manitoba), the geese slipped from one layer of air down to another, to a small green rectangle, a field so tiny that, from a distance, it seemed like we would never be able to hold in it, all together. The banks of the Seine, which were gently meandering in the countryside, were covered with hazel, symphorine and maple bushes. Our geese landed very close to a group of students sitting in the grass around their teacher, near a honeysuckle whose white flowers scented like in a perfumery. The teacher stopped talking, and the schoolchildren watched the geese silently and with great interest. Then, one of the young boy exclaimed joyfully:

—Oh! Sir, look at the gnomes who have just arrived.

—It's not a very good idea, Justin, to refer to people by a physical characteristic. These children certainly do not like to be referred to by their small size.

—You are right, sir, to make this reproach, I replied. But I'm sure he didn't do it intentionally to humiliate us. For our part, our physical defect is not a painful ordeal because it is not permanent. We voluntarily chose to be small for five weeks to be able to make this fantastic trip through our country.

The students were astonished to hear these words that were supposed to come out of such a tiny person. At their request, Jacques then took the floor to sum up our trip succinctly. Then the teacher wanted to introduce us to his terroir, his region. He pointed out that we were precisely on the land of Louis Riel

and his Metis people who had founded two provinces: Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

We stayed in the company of these children who had pitched their tents on the banks of The Seine. In the evening, under the lush foliage that formed in places a canopy, a vegetal vault, the teacher was kind enough to tell us a Sioux legend of the region.

—About ten kilometers from here stretches the Plaine du Cheval Blanc, the White Horse Plain. In the middle of this plain, stands the village of Saint-François-Xavier. A long time ago, during the days of the bison, two Indian peoples fought over this region: the Sioux of the south and the Cree of the north. The Sioux, who were much more fierce and terrifying, gradually pushed the Cree north and eventually occupied the entire area, as far as Sioux Lookout, north of Lake Superior. And it was not until the formation of a new people, the Métis of the Rivière Rouge, who were the children of Cree women and French-Canadian coureurs-de-bois, that the Sioux were pushed back south. Thus, the Cree were able to regain their hunting grounds. But at the time of this history, the Metis people did not yet exist. The Red River region was populated by Assiniboine...

—Your introduction is a bit too detailed! I said. We can see that you are a teacher!

—Yes! To make a long story short, the chief of this Assiniboine tribe had a daughter of irresistible beauty. It looked like the moon and the sun had come together to give her that mesmerizing charm. As a result, not a day went by without many admirers, buckling under rich gifts they brought, showed up under the chief's tipi to ask for the hand of his delicious and bewitching daughter. The Grand Chief wanted to use his daughter's marriage to create alliances between the tribes in order to strengthen peace, and he waited for the right suitor to show up.

—*I too would like to become beautiful as this princess, whispered Valerie.*

—*I'm sure you will, the teacher replied with a smile... So, one day, two good parties showed up: a Sioux chief from Dakota and a Cree from Lake Winnipegosis. The Sioux initially had his favor because he brought a powerful treaty of Alliance that would protect his tribe from the Northern Cree and even from the European tribes that were beginning to sweep across America. But when the Cree suitor appeared before the tipi, the determination of the Assiniboine Chief began to crumble when he saw the gift that the man brought him: he held by the bridle a magnificent white stallion, one of those Mexican White Devils so ardent and bubbling that they run faster than a unicorn, so impetuous that they can pass the swiftest bison, the most flamboyant riders, unbalance the most agile riders with a single jolt if they so wish.*

The Indian chief then stood up to take the bridle of the mustang and said to the Cree chief:

—*This is an irresistible argument! Young man, I give you my daughter as a wife. Take her right away. This thoroughbred is as beautiful as Pegasus,*

—*Who is Pegasus? I asked. I thought that it was a constellation.*

—*Yes, it's a constellation. It's this one, next to Andromeda... he said, pointing his finger at the starry sky. Because night had fallen in the meantime... But it was also a horse that carried lightning and was very beautiful.*

—*Personally, I think that this chief gave his daughter a little too easily... for a simple horse... As beautiful as this nag was... The leader was abusing a little.*

—*Yes, you're right, but it's probably just a legend. So, I continue. Facing this irresistible horse, the resolution of the leader melted like butter in a pan, and he renounced his alliance with*

the Sioux to ally himself with the Cree. But the Medicine Man, the Assiniboine wizard, did not want it that way:

—As if it were not enough to make peace with our Cree enemies, now you want to push the sacrilege to the point of mixing our blood with theirs.

We see that prejudice is not the fault, the weakness of just a single race. To avoid any opposition from the Sioux rival, the date of the ceremony had been set during a war expedition of their tribe, but the Medicine Man secretly warned the Sioux pretender.

On the day of the ceremony, the Cree Chief was brought from Lake Winnipegosis onto his large grey mare. He had put on his magnificent feather headdress and held by the bridle the white alezan, which reared and neighed to make the heart of the Assiniboine chief leap. But suddenly a lookout appeared to announce that he had seen on the horizon a troop of Sioux who arrived at the triple gallop of their horses, in a cloud of dust.

—But, sir, how could he see the horsemen in the dust? James asked.

—Well, Jacques, I grant you that I made a small mistake of staging. You are a good observer. So, I continue...

The Sioux eager for revenge arrived at breakneck speed. And the Assiniboine chief ordered his son-in-law to flee immediately to protect his wife, for the Sioux would certainly kidnap or kill her.

—Take her away! This is her only chance! Quick!

The Cree felt disgraced to have to flee from an enemy, even if it was out of love for the girl he cherished passionately. He had never fled before that day. He hurried away on his gray mare, preceded by the white steed ridden by the beautiful princess dressed in white. She could have outpaced the Sioux and

outdistanced them without danger of being caught, but she had to wait for her husband who was riding his tired gray nag.

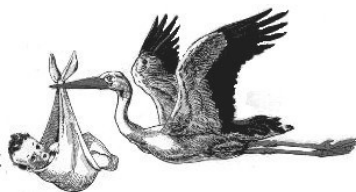
—*Come, let's stop in this grove*, said the princess to allow her husband's horse to catch its breath again.

It was very close to the current village of Saint-François-Xavier. The Cree chief didn't want to take a break but he was forced to follow her, because she refused to continue on her way, knowing that her husband would be caught in the minutes that followed. A few minutes later, the Sioux arrived, and their arrows killed the lovers. The gray mare was captured, but the white steed ran away and no one was ever able to grab it. Some have even claimed that the soul of the princess has passed into the body of the palfrey, which continues to run like the wind in the great plain, now called the White Horse Plain.

The teacher stopped speaking and a bullfrog was heard lamenting in the night.

—What a scary story! Jacques whispered with a dreamy air.

Midnight suddenly started ringing at the teacher's watch. Wasting no time, the teacher sent everyone to sleep in the tents.



46

The louse who underestimated himself

The darkness had not yet decided to go back behind the horizon to give way to the day, when I was partially awakened by a tickle inside my ear. Mechanically, my finger went to remove the dust or ant that had lodged there. I was about to crush this tickle under my index finger, when I heard a cry that woke me up completely:

—No! No! Please don't kill me. You're going to crush me without even realizing it.

The voice sounded huge and I opened my eyes and spread Tania's wing to see if the others woke up. Everyone continued to sleep peacefully. It was then that I understood that if I heard this mysterious voice so clearly, it was because the intruder was hiding in my ear. I put my hand against my cheek so that it would bring my voice to the pavilion of my ear, and I said:

—Who are you? What are you doing in my ear so early in the morning? You wake me up when I went to bed at midnight, way too late for me who is just a kid.

—Hello, dear Caroline, I know you all fell asleep very late. I was with you. You take advantage because your parents are not there, and the geese, obviously, have neither the judgment nor the authority to send you to sleep earlier.

I was amazed to hear these reproaches against us, certainly well-deserved but very unpleasant, and especially the criticism against our friends the geese. I was about to reply sharply with impatience and even a little irritation, when I heard the voice that resumed:

—I hesitate to tell you who I am, Caroline. I know that you will probably react with frenzy and intolerance. But in any case,

thank you for listening to my story to the end, and for showing some interest in me. No one is interested in a miserable being like me. And yet I am honest, kind, understanding. I think a lot... I can even read, because I go to school. This is quite exceptional in my case. I am.... I think sooner or later I'll have to tell you... I am... No! Please don't blame me. Don't chase me out of your ear. I'd like to talk to you longer... I am... a louse ...

—*A what?* I said.

—A louse, l-o-u-se... No, listen to me again. Don't let yourself go to a panic attack! Please forget your prejudices and agree to listen to me. You know, dear friend, they despise me because they don't know me well. It's true that I'm small and ugly. But millions of humans, small and ugly, suffer from the same prejudices. I am called a "parasite" because, to feed myself, I suck the blood of poor people. But in your society, thousands of humans also live as parasites of the work of others. They are usually people who get rich very quickly, and everyone respects them a lot. So why despise us, lice? It's not fair! Even the SPCA refuses to protect us! It is as if the United Nations or Greenpeace or the International Red Cross refused to help a nation in the world. It's unimaginable, isn't it?

—*I agree, yes!* I replied, forced to note the irrefutable logic of this reasoning.

—*I am an ordinary louse. And, like thousands of lice, I learned to develop my intelligence to survive. It's a matter of life and death for us. Natural selection is harsh and merciless. Only the smartest survive the everyday dangers. My mother taught me to wait until night to have a safe lunch. When my "carrier" is sleeping. Oh, yes! I must tell you that we call "carrier" the human who serves us as a means of transport, housing and food supplier...*

—*So, right now, I'm "your carrier"?*

—That's right, Caroline, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

—... and from the bottom of my ear...

—Yes, also... I love your sense of humor... Thus, when our "carrier" is asleep, he does not scramble against our bites, and we can have lunch in peace. Otherwise we are continually disturbed during our meals like you by the phone, and I suffer from violent stomach cramps that make my life miserable... That's the way it is. You have to accept what you can't change. I didn't ask to be an awful louse. But I am. I had a hard time accepting it when I was a child. Knowing that you are an outcast in this world has never been pleasant for anyone. Unable to change my exterior, I changed my interior. That's what all ugly people do. They seek to give the impression that their moral or intellectual qualities more than compensate for their ugliness. As far as I'm concerned, I really try to be perfect, knowing that this is an unattainable ideal. Little by little, I forged a philosophy. I now accept myself as I am externally, and I feel very good about my inside. So much so that I sometimes wonder why our "porters" are so horrified when they see us. I have also noticed that poor porters generally tolerate us better than rich people. They may be less racist than the rich, even if many think otherwise. The only problem is that among the poor we are more numerous and I have to fight for my territory. That's why I prefer the rich. No, I'm not a snob, but we're more at ease. There are certain rules to respect: don't show off. Otherwise death is assured. They seek you with ruthless relentlessness until your total destruction. So we must be very cautious...

—I can understand that!

—So, Caroline, towards the end of my teenage years, my father decided to get me some education. Every day I went to school in the hair of Jonathan, my former porter and friend, being careful not to get noticed. At first, all this seemed to me quite incomprehensible. But little by little, one letter after another, I

learned to read, to count, and my mind opened to the great problems of the world. During the 3R's classes (reading, writing and arithmetic), I took the opportunity to change room. It is quite obvious that I cannot write, and that I never will. You have to know how to limit yourself to your possibilities. So, I was going into the head of a girl of a higher level to learn more. I like girls' hair. This gives me more room to get some exercise without being spotted and chased. And you can't imagine how much I hate the fashion of short hair...

—That's understandable! I said.

—I'm not making you say it, Caro... Do you allow me to call you Caro?

—It's my favorite nickname. My father used to call me Pepet, but I admit that...

—Yes, I understand that. You must have rebelled against such a nickname?

—Absolutely. I once said to him, "Dad, my name is Caroline. Thank you." He understood.

—You did well. You have to say politely but firmly what you think. Otherwise, we have no right to complain about others... I come back to myself... By the way, I hope I don't bother you too much. You must find me very self-centered talking about myself all the time?

—No, not at all. On the contrary, I find it very unusual and very interesting to listen to someone who can tell me about such an exceptional life. I am sure that some London tabloids would pay fortunes to get exclusivity. Go on, keep going, please!

—Thank you, Caro, for encouraging me... With the instruction, therefore, my mind opened and I became interested in my fellow pupils. I have sometimes gone on sleep over, on excursions to other children's homes. I would just get into their hair and spend the night with their family. The next day, back at school,

I would come back into Jonathan's head. The following evening, at home, I shared my experiences with my brother and sister, Zig and Zag. I loved these outings and sleepovers. And I saw a lot of things. I have noticed that the worst students usually have parents who argue continuously, as if for pleasure, without thinking about the happiness of their children, or no parents at all. And that's as true for the rich as it is for the poor.

—I appreciate your objectivity, my dear. Uh?

—Zug, a weird name, isn't it? Yes, I was born in Zug, Switzerland. In any case, if I tell you my story, Caroline, it is not to criticize the people who spoil me so much. It's more to show you that, even if I'm a bit of a... parasite, I am also sometimes useful to society...

—Well! Well!

—Yes, on a Monday night of December, as the streets of Winnipeg begin to be decorated with multicolored lights, Jonathan sleeps quietly in his room. I take advantage of his sleep to have lunch without disturbing him. As usual, I prick him in the ear because I know he doesn't feel anything there. I only eat at night and I enjoy this breakfast very much. I literally devour until I feel unable to jump. However, that evening, at the beginning of my lunch, I hear the cat of the house meowing in a strange way. I listen attentively and I understand that an extraordinary event is happening on the other side of the door. So, I jump on the carpet, go under the door and I see flames coming out of the heating air vent in the wall of the corridor. Fire! The house burns like a pyre and all humans sleep for their final slumber. What to do? I scream as loud as my vocal cords and lungs allow, but you understand that no one hears me. I return to the room, jump on the bed and then on Jonathan's nose. He is totally unaware of the mortal danger. How to wake him up? I have to find a sore spot to sting... The lip! My mother always advised me never to prick lips. Too sensitive! I bite his lip. No reaction. My dear friend does not move. I then stung him fiercely without

stopping, dozens and dozens of times. Suddenly I get a big slap that lets me roll on the carpet of the room. This is how we are thanked for serving those we love! Fortunately, his own slap has woken him up and Jonathan rushes outside shouting, "Fire! Fire!"

—Oh, don't shout so loudly, Zoug, you're piercing my eardrum!

—Excuse me, dear Caro, I didn't want to upset you... So as soon as Jonathan comes out, I jump as high as I can, and soon Jonathan's whole family —and even mine— is out; Saved! Oh! There it is! What a fear! But I think now I don't consider myself a parasite anymore. I saved the life of an entire family. So, I am a savior. They don't know it, but I do. That's the important thing. That's why I now feel good about myself, in Jonathan's ear, and in your ear, Caro.

—You mean you want to travel across Canada now?

—Yes, because everyone says that travel is good for the youth.

— Yes, that's true, but I'd rather you take a slightly more conventional means of transport.



The Grand Ball of snakes

A few minutes later, the teacher rang the alarm clock. But he almost had to get angry to have everybody ready . And then, the inevitable moment of departure and separation arrived, and, for a long time, we could see the hands of all these children waving to wish us *bon voyage*.

We flew over Winnipeg following the Seine River, the mouth of the Assiniboine, then northbound along the Red River that will flow into the great Lake Winnipeg. A student had advised us, the night before, to visit the village of Narcisse, 80^{km} further north, to see a local curiosity, the Ball of the Snakes. That's why Tania of Montmagny continued due north. The ground was so flat, the roads so straight, that it almost made us doze off. So, I shouted to my sister and brother:

—Be careful not to fall asleep! You risk losing your balance and falling.

As far as the eye could see, the Prairie was yellow. Wheat, wheat and always wheat. Very few trees. The roads formed large squares and intersected at right angles. Large silos were the only real buildings that stood out in the landscape.

The region of Narcisse truly gave the most curious spectacle in the world. An owl with disturbing small yellow-green eyes, approached to do us the honor of the province of Manitoba she represented. She taught us that this Snake Ball happened twice a year. Tens of thousands of red-sided garter snakes emerge from their underground hibernation and launch themselves into a grand wedding ball. The males came out first *en masse* (by the millions) and the females arrived later, one by one.

They were then courted by hundreds of males dancing around them. Everyone hoped to be chosen as spouses, everyone wanted to be the lucky one.

—*It looks like snake spaghetti*, Valerie whispered. *And then, how do these females choose their husbands?*

—*Well, in the end, it's very mysterious. The female decides, for reasons that remain a mystery (as in humans), to choose as husband one of the males among the hundreds that surround her, and then, as soon as she has made her choice, the others discreetly step aside...*

—*Maybe... to respect their privacy*, Jacques added.

—*Sometimes*, the Lapland owl continued by blinking with its large yellow-green eyes and waving its small dark ears, *some males who want to feel popular or who have not had the chance to be chosen by a female, begin themselves to emit a female smell, and they are immediately surrounded by a crowd of males who make them a assiduous courtship.*

—*Mysterious!* Valerie whispered, still curious, raising her eyebrows.



48

Batoche

We had to leave again. We have climbed the sky where it was two degrees lower than at ground level. Passing over a small town, flon-flon of music grazed our ears. A crowd of people had gathered in the public square in front of a church. A few stalls offered games, sweets and food. At my request, Tania went lower. I wanted to see people rejoice. Children were holding red, green, yellow and blue balloons at the end of long strings. It was like multicolored flowers in a kindergarten. Suddenly, the shrill screams of a little girl dominated the murmur of the crowd and the music. A kid was screaming as she stretched out her arms towards her balloon that was rising in the sky.

—She dropped her balloon, poor little girl. She seems so unhappy.

Jacques asked Geneviève of Cap-St-Ignace to rush to the sky in pursuit of the rapidly rising red balloon. He was able to grab the string and Geneviève dove towards the crowd from where "Oh!" and "Ah!" of surprise were heard. When the goose touched the long grass of the Prairie, Jacques jumped to the ground and approached the child who had stopped crying. All around, the crowd remained totally silent, examining this alien, balloon in hand.

—Here you are! This is your balloon little girl. Don't cry more.

The child took the end of the string without any surprise, and to thank Jacques, gave him a pale purple flower she held in her other hand, a prairie crocusⁱ.

—*Thank you, take this beautiful flower because you are so kind,*
said the girl.

Cheeks purple, Jacques then jumped on the back of his wild goose which flew away quickly before the crowd came to its senses. A little further on, a sign welcomed us to the Province of Saskatchewan. And soon after, the geese landed in a grove not far from a town named Esterhazy, named after a Hungarian nobleman. After dining on some wild berries, we fell asleep under the watchful care of Iris.

As soon as the quivering ears of the wheat fields began to caress the first ray of sunshine bursting from the horizon, a sharp-tailed grouse celebrated the event with its joyful song, waving its pointed tail like a racing spinnaker sail. I would have liked to sleep a little longer, but Tania of Montmagny shouted again:

—*Everybody up! Fortune favors early bird...*

There are days when she really gets on my nerves. And to help me awaken from my sweet torpor, she opened her wings and I suddenly fell into a bouquet of prairie lilies. The image may look beautiful; But the ground was very hard:

—*Ouch! Ouch! You're so brutal, Tania!*

—*Energy, Caroline! she said. Energy! It's time!*

Reproaching me for lacking energy, to me! That was the height of it. I have a lot to spare. But I knew that Tania had gotten up on the wrong foot, on the wrong paw, and I didn't insist. A sheet of newspaper was taken from a hedge.

After railing against pollution, we realized that, by an extraordinary coincidence, it was the front page of the Minnedosa Tribune that displayed the event of the balloon on five columns on the front page. That day, it was very hot. The heat was becoming more and more suffocating. The Prairie was still draped in golden wheat. To escape this drought and heat, I asked Tania,

our guide goose, to climb a little higher in altitude where we found some freshness.

—Tania of Montmagny, we should stop in this region. We arrived in the Saint-Laurent subdivision created by the French-speaking Métis of the West.

The wild geese made landfall in a green meadow near a white church that looked like one I had noticed in the villages of the Belle Province of Quebec. I immediately jumped to the ground, and, followed by Jacques and Valerie, we went to the door of the church of St. Anthony of Padua.

—You see this church, my brother and sister. Well, it was the church itself that witnessed the last battle of the Métis of the West when the federal army came to crush them in 1885.

—In 1885? Jacques replied, laughing. You wouldn't have some more recent stories?

—Don't joke, please Jacques. I am very moved to think of those Métis who fought for their freedom. Some were 95 years old. They preferred to die rather than see their defeat. They ran out of ammunition and had to put rocks in their old rifles to replace the lead. They were fighting for democracy, each one against five federal soldiers, against rifles, bayonets, cannons and even two machine guns...

The very end of the afternoon was spent meditating on this hopeless fight. It was already close to midnight. As I sank into sleep, under the starry sky, I thought of the brave fighters of Batoche and I felt like I heard the whisper of the war anthem they sang as they died for freedom during that famous four-day battle:

—Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guerre, Mironton, Mironton, Miron-taine! Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guerre, ne sait quand reviendra!...

In the dark sky, the North Star, pivot of the sky and stars, shone brightly so that the Milky Way and all the constellations could circle around it.

Batoche



49

Caroline is kidnapped

The tragic events that followed were recounted to me by my brother Jacques. That is why I leave him the pen. As I said above, we had gone to bed very late, the night before, and Valerie and I had quickly plunged into a deep sleep. But Jacques, moved by the presence around him of all those “sons of Freedom” ghosts who had met their cruel destiny here, had had the greatest difficulty in falling asleep. But I’ll give him the floor.

—When I heard a shrill scream, I really felt like I had just fallen asleep. Where did this heart-rending howl come from? An old Métis hit by a federal bayonet? I must have been mistaken because, as I pushed aside the comfortable down that sometimes tickled my nostrils, I saw that a few thin rays of sunshine had already slipped between the wooded hills forming the horizon to the east, towards Domrémy. All these filaments of bright light, sharp as fine needles, began to lift a corner of the sheet of night, and extinguished one by one the stars and constellations. The moon itself faded as if modestly waning before the sun. We are modest in front of the people who intimidate us.

I asked my goose:

—Did you hear that terrible cry?

—Yes... But I don't know what's going on. That sounds like Caroline's voice.

—Caroline's voice? But you have to give alert, immediately.

I jumped at the foot of my wild goose who had slept standing up, for once, and I screamed to wake everyone up. Valerie arrived, all ruffled:

—What's the matter? Why are you screaming?

That's when Tania popped up, her eyes, upset:

—Caroline has disappeared! Caroline has disappeared!

—She walked away for a moment to go peeing behind a bush, and I heard cries for help.... I rushed... She wasn't there anymore... Vanished...

—Calm down, Tania. We will find her. Don't get upset...

—As soon as I realized that I had responsibility for my own life and the lives of others, I felt confident, calm and determined. It was at this time that an old long-eared owl with large blackish ears flew at the approach to give us some important information:

—I found myself that night perched on a charm of Caroline...

—A charm of Caroline? What do you mean, owl? I exclaimed with some impatience, thinking he was joking.

—It's my favorite tree.

—So what do you know, owl?

—Well, I was perched on my usual branch, getting ready to go home just before dawn, when suddenly two good-sized birds landed under my tree. They seemed to be hiding and plotting a bad move. I could see them despite the night. You know that if I see very poorly during the day, I have, on the other hand, excellent night vision. That's my strength...

—Yes, yes! Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, commented Tania de Montmagny.

The little one who seemed to be the leader repeated:

—Schak! Schak! Don't make noise, fool. Watch well! We may have a good opportunity tonight... Fifteen days we wait!"

—How was the other bird? asked Tania.

—*Much bigger, replied the owl. He looked like a heron. He kept repeating: Ounk-eu-lunk! At your command, my beloved leader! Ounk-eu-lunk! »*

—*It's them! I shouted. It's Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-Bittern! And what did they do? Tell us!*

—*At one point, I saw a tiny girl arrive, no longer than a mouse. She came from your camp. At the moment I wanted to jump on her and take her away, but I could see that it was not an animal. So I waited to see what the two ominous birds were going to do with this miniature person.*

—*What did they do?"*

—*They were very surprised to see the kid appear right in front of them. It was then that the little shrike shouted to the heron: "Catch her! Grab her in your big beak, Moron-the-Bittern, and let's flee! The heron jumped on the child, took it in its beak and flew away, followed by the shrike. They left and quickly disappeared from my sight.*

—*In what direction? I asked.*

—*Go there! replied the owl, holding out its wing to the west.*

—*Well, we have to pursue them. You, Valerie, stay here in Batoche with six geese. You don't move from here under any circumstances!*

—*Why is that? Valerie replied a little disappointed.*

—*Someone absolutely has to stay put in case Caroline manages to escape and try to join us here. Otherwise we will lose her...*

—*Yes, I think you're right, but it breaks my heart not to go to her rescue!*

—*It's a big sacrifice, but believe me, it's worth it. We absolutely have to save our sister's life, otherwise I'd never dare. Otherwise I won't dare to show up in front of mom and dad... Good. So*

you stay here and I leave with six geese to help you: Geneviève, Tania, Roussette, Violette, Blanche and Annie.

Without wasting a second, we took off west with my wild geese, hearts oppressed with apprehension and anger. I know that it is not wise to keep these two negative feelings in our heart. It's bad for our mental and therefore physical health. But in the heat of emotion, I was unable to clear my troubled mind. We were ready to fight to the death with these two rascals to save and free our sister Caroline. As we rose into the sky of Batoche, I saw the little white church, and I said a little prayer to its patron saint, Anthony of Padua, who, according to tradition, helps to find people or lost objects.



50

The Prairie Hunt

The geese immediately began to fly at a vertiginous speed. We were going in the dark. The first grazing rays of the rising sun illuminated only the hills. Everything else —valleys, western slopes of mountains and hillsides— was still plunged into menacing darkness.

—Open your eyes, geese, I cried. We will go down to 20 meters above sea level for a better view. Try to look at every dark valley, every shadowy "flow", every talweg still obscure.

The flock of wild geese descended in low ground. That's when Tania spotted a white she-wolf with her cub. The guide goose shouted:

—Hello beautiful wolf. You, who have good eyesight, would you have noticed by chance a shrike and an American bittern fleeing west?

—Thank you for the compliments, elegant snow goose!" It would have been hard not to notice them. They literally flew low to the ground. They descended into each unlit valley as if to hide. They clearly had a mischief to cover-up. I even heard them conversing. The shrike seemed drunk with joy. She kept saying, "Trickster-the-Shrike, this is the happiest day of my life. Schak! Schak! The most beautiful! You are an irreplaceable and extraordinary being!" And the bittern replied, "I like to hear you talk like that, boss. Ounk-eu-lunk! I lacked love during my childhood and I would do any mischief, any robbery to get your esteem and friendship, Trickster-the-Shrike. I finally found a family to love me." But, as they disappeared in the distance, I heard one last answer in the quiet of the night: "Schak! Schak! Don't talk too much, fool! Otherwise you're going to act like the stupid raven in the fable, you'll let Caroline fall and she'll be

dead. I want to keep her alive as a hostage to ransom the other children by forcing them to all humiliations. My vengeance will be terr..." And the rest of the commentary got lost in the distance.

Hearing these words, I felt a horrible shiver run down my spine. I then had an idea that I would describe as great, even if my modesty must suffers a little. I went back to talk to the she-wolf:

—Hi! Beautiful wolf. You who communicate so well at a distance, could you send a message to the moon?

—To the moon? But don't you see that the moon is timidly fading in front of the sun? As a woman, this modesty irritates me. I hope that one day the moon will no longer leak at daybreak. I have a lot of hope in the new moons...

—What exactly are you talking about, beautiful she-wolf?

—Nothing, nothing, I thought out loud. Thinking aloud, I have unwittingly given you my deepest thoughts. What message do you want to send?

—"Notice to all wolves in Alberta and the Rocky Mountains. If you spot a shrike accompanied by a bittern, please indicate the name of the village when they are far enough away not to imply that they are being tracked. Message to repeat. Thank you!"

—Your messages are very long. You're lucky, I don't charge you by the syllable, joked the white wolf.

—Come on, please, beautiful she-wolf. Send the message, please!

The she-wolf raised her muzzle, opened her mouth and began to howl her message:

—You have such a kind way of asking for it that I start immediately... Oooouuuuuu Notice to all wolves in Alberta and the Rocky Mountains. If you spot..... Oooouuuuuu.....

As we left, we heard twice the message howled at the top of their voices. Then, from far and wide, we heard names such as: *Maidstone, Lloyminster, Vermillion...* Obviously, the two scoundrels who were fearful of straying into the immense Prairie, simply following the Trans-Canada Highway heading for Edmonton, the capital of Alberta.

Now the sun had occupied every valley and we were very hot. Tania would have liked to go up a little in altitude to seek freshness, but I urged her to stay as low as possible so as not to risk missing out on any information howled by wolves or wolves. From far and wide, oil pumps swayed tirelessly in the middle of wheat and rye fields or in cattle meadows. Each farm had a large grain elevator along railway tracks with trains marked with bilingual *Canadian Wheat Board – Commission canadienne du Blé* inscriptions.

But we didn't have the heart to admire the beautiful landscapes of Alberta when we knew that our dear Caroline was in danger, caught like a gray mouse in the beak of this awful bird.
—"*Ooooooooouuuuu Ooooooooouuuu Robb's West! Robb's West! Repeated a distant call.*

The whole horizon was closed by a formidable barrier of steep mountains that stood before us as if to block our way and prevent us from finding Caroline. A wall of one or sometimes two kilometers stood above the flat Prairie. A wolf howl warned us that the fugitives had been spotted by a hawk on the side of Tête-Jaune Cache, in the very heart of the Rockies, in the beautiful landscapes of Jasper National Park. Yet my eyes did not appreciate these beauties. I anxiously searched every valley, every fold of land, every lake, to find my sister.

In spite of our rest of a few hours, in the early afternoon, we were totally exhausted because this stage had been particularly long. Nearly 900 km in a straight line, as the crow flies. Everywhere springs of mineral water, hot, smoked and sparkled

like Perrier; glaciers that I wanted to lick as they looked like ice cream cones; forests of graceful firs, giant sequoias, mouflons playing like unconscious children on the edge of bottomless precipices, pudgy bears who had seen and heard nothing when I asked them if they had noticed a shrike and a bittern. It was discouraging. At times, I lost all hope of seeing my sister again and I thought of the anguish and heartbreak of my parents when it will be necessary to tell them the sad news.

Finally, as the sun, itself tired from this exhausting day, was about to set in some glacial valley just beyond the mountains, we fortunately came across a very friendly peregrine falcon who recognized by my accent that I came from the east of our great country. He himself had made a pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Sainte-Anne de Beaupré in his youth, accompanied by his pious relatives who have now disappeared. We heard in the late afternoon that a heron and a shrike had taken refuge in Tête-Jaune Cache. The news runs fast in the mountains, at the speed of chinouk, this westerly wind, dry and warm, which melts the snow of the Prairies. The peregrine falcon was preparing for supper with a bird he had just "invited". It was an ortolan. This shows how some pilgrims do not deprive themselves of anything.

—*I see that you give yourself the best food, I told him.*

—*Why do you say that? I don't know this bird at all.*

—*I am not surprised. Ortolan does not live in our regions, as far as I know. He was probably visiting our country. Your welcome is not the most heartfelt. Maybe you should spare it.*

The falcon was finally moved despite his hunger. He loosened his claws. The Ortolan came out, and, after a lengthy snort, he thanked me again for my intervention. We immediately took the road to Tête-Jaune, followed by the ortolan who knew little about this region for having stayed there for a short time. He told us that Tête-Jaune was the nickname of a blond

Franco-Iroquois Métis named Pierre Bostonnais who had come to settle in this region strategically located on the watershed between the Atlantic and the Pacific. From there, he could ship goods from either side.

Night had completely fallen when we arrived at the village of Tête-Jaune-Cache. We could hardly see at all, despite the moon doing its best to illuminate each valley and each crevasse. Despite its eager help, we reluctantly postponed the search for my sister until the next day.



51

In the claws of our enemies

All night I imagined Caroline being manhandled by her cruel captors. I could see her swept away in Moron-the-Bittern's huge beak, exhausted and broken. And that's exactly what happened. Let the reader imagine traveling in the beak of a bird! After 100 km, Caroline lost consciousness and would have died if the two birds had not taken many breaks, because they wanted to keep her alive. And then Zug —remember the smart louse who had taken up residence in my sister's ear in Winnipeg— never ceased to lavish his encouragement. He repeated to her that the two kidnappers did not want to kill her, that she was much more useful to them alive than dead, and that she would see before long her dear family and her wild geese who must have most certainly set out to find her.

Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-bittern didn't know yet what they were going to do with her, but they did want to keep her alive to use as bait, so as to lure the other two children into a death trap. It was not the big Moron-the-Bittern rascal who imagined, conceived and stew it all, but the inventive and cunning shrike, diabolically intelligent. Through an overly talkative wolf, the two birds had heard that they were being pursued. They tried to distance their pursuers and disappear into the wilderness. They knew that in any case they might sooner or later find the other two children in Surrey or White Rock whose names the two birds had heard thanks to a friendly breeze that had brought them the words.

Indeed, one evening, while they were spying on us in the anonymity of the night, they had heard us talk about the Gabrielle-Roy School where Marie-France, our mother was about to teach. All they had to do was watch for her when she left the school and follow her back to our home to find Jacques and

Valérie. No one would be suspicious of two flawless-looking birds that had the immense advantage of being federally protected. After that, it would be child's play to imagine a trap by letting them believe that they were going to find Caroline. And their vengeance would be complete; cruel but complete!

As soon as the sun rose, I did my toilet and had lunch. The geese began to eat, smooth their feathers and warm up their muscles still aching from the thousands of wingbeats of the day before. It was very necessary to avoid muscular accidents. The site of Tête-Jaune Cache, which the sun had finally decided to illuminate, was admirable. The city huddled in an ancient valley carved by ice, and we could breathe oxygen at the top of our lungs. Perhaps one day I will be able to come and live here in more favorable conditions.

—Well, it's time to take off, Tania of Montmagny.

—Look at this great horned owl who seems to go to sleep after a night of hunting, over there in the mountain. Let's ask him if he didn't notice anything last night.

The eagle owl is a beautiful but unsociable bird. Tania thought it was out of pride that he refused to let himself be approached. But I knew that those who seem proud and snobbish are usually just shy people who feel bad about themselves and have difficulty making friends. So I insisted on approaching him and talking to him. Finally our Grand Duke was quite sympathetic. He only wanted to be loved, like everyone else. His loneliness weighed on him and he proved to be kind and generous. He even wanted to share with us a rat he had captured in a field.

—I find it strange that you should look disgusted when I offer you my rat, young man, said the Grand Duke, very disappointed and even a little offended, as you probably eat frogs' legs and snails.

I had to admit that it lacked logic and consistency. But stomach contractions cannot be controlled. To change the conversation, because I don't like to dwell too much on my numerous faults, I asked the Grand Duke if he had by chance heard about a certain Caroline, prisoner of a shrike and a bittern. To my surprise—and to my delight, for I dared not hope so—he replied in the affirmative:

—Can you see the great magnolia of Soulange there in the valley?... Well, I had just begun my night hunt, and for this I had perched on one of the branches of this magnificent tree, yesterday at sunset, when a great bittern, and a shrike that seemed to be the leader, landed in the thick grass. The bittern was carrying a miniature girl in his beak...

—In his beak!... It was my sister Caroline!...

—She looked in bad shape. At first I thought she was dead. But they spat water on her face and they woke her up. She was crying. That was a good sign. When the bittern went to fetch water at the bottom of the valley, I had the idea to hunt the shrike and seize the kid,...

—That would have been a great idea! I shouted.

—Not really, because... I was hungry... and I might have let myself be tempted...

—Oh noooo!...

—Eventually, I let them do whatever they wanted. They slept under my magnolia. Caroline was cold and asked the shrike to sleep under the bittern's wing. The latter was furious but he obeyed, grumbling: "What a stupid idea! ... I'm not a white goose... If my friends find out, they'll be having a field day, out of it..." Always his stupid little macho complexes. Caroline seemed to have slept well under his wing, and this morning, just before sunrise, they took the direction of the northeast, towards Calais...

—Calais?" Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Grand Duke, I replied by making a significant gesture to Tania, intended to give the signal for an immediate take-off.



52

And again the pursuit

A few minutes later, we flew over the watershed that separates the two provinces, as well as the huge and wonderful National Park, beautiful as a Garden of Eden. We were going back to Alberta, to the Great Plains of the West. From the top of these mountains, we dived for several impressive minutes. Excited about this life off the beaten path. Even geese were having an exceptional adventure by not following their usual migration routes. Tania of Montmagny exclaimed:

—What an extraordinary life, Jacques! You realize that you could be in a classroom, subjected to a demanding teacher, sweating blood and water to solve an arduous and complex problem of math, imagined by a teacher with a tortuous and merciless mind. Do you realize how lucky you are not to be a slave at work?

—You make a big mistake, Tania of Montmagny, if you think we are free because we do not work. It's the opposite!

Seeing a wedge of trumpeter swans passing by, with only their large pointed beaks and legs not immaculate white, I shouted at them, stretching out my arm towards the horizon:

—Say, swans, what is the name of the city over there, cooling off its feet in the water of the lake?"

—Calais! And the lake is the Lake of the Sturgeon, they replied in chorus.

—Calais! That name reminds me something," Roussette said.

—I know, I know," Genevieve cried. It is a town in the state of Maine that we flew over on the road to Newfoundland.

—What an elephant's memory," I said.

—*Elephant? You mean wild goose, Jacques! Elephants don't come close to us. If we had had white pebbles to mark our way, like the Little Thumb, we would not have made an effort to remember and we would get lost all the time like humans when they do not have maps or GPS.*

The pursuit of my poor Caroline's kidnappers went on unabated. Was she still healthy? She had to suffer martyrdom by traveling uncomfortably like prey stuck in the bittern's beak. I felt like we weren't moving at all and it was the hills and rivers slowly moving below us. We just had to stand still in the air, turned in one direction and the scenery ran and scrolled by itself, like in a video game. It was amazing. Maybe if I had had to exhaust myself flapping my wings to move forward, I would not have had this feeling of stillness. Annie of L'Islet, who was holding at that time the tip of the gaggle of geese to allow Tania to breathe a little, pointed out on the horizon the presence of a large lake at least 80 ^{km} long. A sparrow informed us courteously. It was, he said, the Little Lake of Slaves.

—It's far from small, Annie commented.

—Certainly, but we are still small by comparison to a larger...

Below, the Haute-Prairie always very flat, which further south was exclusively covered with tall dry grass, began to the north to adorn itself with small clumps of forest where deciduous and coniferous trees mixed. At times, a hill, alone and isolated like a hermit in the desert, forced straight roads to negotiate a detour. And then, suddenly, from Fort McMurray that we reached in the afternoon, the ground changed color. Curiously, it became dark and even black. Vegetation was rare. It felt like we had changed planets.

—*You arrive in the tar-sand region of Lake Athabaska, announced a spectacled eider that displayed a rather intellectual air, the bituminous sand.*

—*Bitumi... what?* Violette asked.

—Bituminous sand... meaning tar-sand: oil that, instead of being in slicks, has mixed with sand.

Seeing a lone wolf, we landed on a ruined hut to breathe a little and ask him to make an appeal to find my sister. In places, the earth was a thick, blackish paste. From time to time, puddles of heavy oil glistened. The wolf began to howl in the calm of this curious nature, and soon after, a distant cry repeated the message. Soon came the answer, very courageous:

—A shrike and a bittern, flying together, were spotted in Bison-des-Bois National Park towards the tip of Lake Athabaska.

It was them, no doubt. So we turned north, and a few hours later, we entered the park which is the largest national park in Canada, larger than all of Switzerland. It was a paradise where the prairie and the groves blended harmoniously. I was ecstatic from the sky when I saw these thousands of bison.

Even so, these beauties could not distract me from the worry that choked me when I thought of my dear sister in danger. We headed east towards Fond-du-Lac; several additional flying hours. Also, when we landed in Fond-du-Lac, I barely took the time to eat before lying down and sleep. Night was setting. We had flown about twenty hours over nearly 1,200 km – double a normal day of flight– and the geese were about to expire because they were so exhausted of fatigue.



53

Geese attack the two bird

What a pain I had in keeping my eyes open while in guard duty that night, from eleven o'clock to 2:00 in the morning. It wasn't until around 10:00 a.m. that we woke up. I couldn't wait to start my sister Caroline's great search. The geese were given the task of searching for information by interviewing birds in every corner of Fond-du-Lac. What we don't realize, we human, is that birds see everything from the sky. They know all the gossip. All they have to do is ask the magpies who, as everyone knows, talk a lot, and the ducks who talk all day long.

—Tania of Montmagny, you will go to the information in the north of the city, Roussette of Isle-aux-Oies in the south, Violette of Berthier in the east, Blanche of Lac-Frontière in the west and Annie of L'Islet in the center. I will stay here to centralize and process information. As for you, Geneviève, you stay with me.

It is quite obvious that when you have my small size, and the slightest danger puts you in great difficulty, you have to use your brain to compensate for the deficiencies of your muscles.

From hour to hour, my geese came back to give me the result of their gathering of information. Around 9:00 a.m., Annie came to tell me that a most spiritual trio composed of a puffin-monk, a peregrine falcon and a pink-breasted cardinal, who were nesting, as it should be, in a church steeple, had just seen a shrike and a great bittern in the city center. I was overjoyed. I immediately had the feeling that we could rely on such witnesses. Church people are arguably more reliable and credible than ordinary mortals. The searches in the southern district were carried out roundly. I always stayed there with Geneviève to coordinate the investigations.

Finally, around 7:00 p.m., Tania came back announcing that she had found Caroline. Roussette had more precise information. A magpie had spotted the two birds in trees in a southern neighborhood. The two brigands had put Caroline in a large nest after chasing its owner, a goldfinch too weak to defend itself. And, while Moron-the-bittern watched Caroline's nest perched in the bush, a rooster-spiked hawthorn, the shrike had gone to food-quest. Violette of Berthier turned like an AWACS, 400^m above the neighborhood, to monitor the comings and goings of the two kidnappers.

While Violette continued her watch, I gathered the other geese in a clearing to develop a plan of attack. After discussion, we decided to assault the rooster hawthorn at 3:00 am, just before dawn, when great fatigue clouds the mind. The nest was too small to contain one of the two birds in addition to Caroline, so five of the six wild geese would have to attack the two kidnappers while Tania would land on the nest, embark Caroline as quickly as possible and take refuge in the islet while waiting for our return. The other geese were to escort Tania, putting Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-bittern on the run, if necessary.

At 2:30 a.m., we silently gathered in the moonlight. I had the very rewarding impression that we were a commando of the 22nd Regiment preparing for a raid against a formidable enemy. I asked the geese to move by walking as much as possible, because as we took flight, the sound of the wing flapping on the air-layer would wake up the two birds and they might rush to the nest to throw Caroline down the tree bush, to, perhaps... kill her. Thus they would be avenged.

So we started the attack by walking into the next street on the sidewalk, on the tip of the... flippers. I imagined the surprise of a night owl passer-by who would see these six white geese waddling in the dark like ghosts from another planet. But no one passed. Fond-du-Lac is just a small town. Taking care of

the electric wires that could have injured or killed us, we took off very heavily, and, after turning at an altitude of 150 m, Tania of Montmagny ordered to descend in a gliding flight, totally silent, towards the prison-tree.

The plan was simple and I had twice repeated the phases before takeoff. As planned, we attacked the birds in gliding flight to overcome any approach noise and thus maximize the surprise of the two kidnappers. Violette, Roussette and Genevieve simultaneously hit Moron-the-Bittern at eye level in order to blind him, at least for a while. Blanche and Annie lunged at Trickster-the-Shrike with the same goals. Meanwhile, Tania landed on the branch where the nest was, woke Caroline up without scaring her too much, took her in her beak to avoid any transshipment accidents and fled with my sister to take refuge in the islet where we had slept the night before. The five geese looked like white ghosts in the night. The two nasty birds were so pecked on the head that they collapsed unconscious at the foot of the tree.

Ten minutes later, the six wild geese, mad with joy, were gathered in the islet. The sun was already reddening the Saskatchewan sky. After a long time hugging my dear sister to my heart, I said in a whisper:

—Forward, let us fly thirty minutes to the West, then we will head south!

Hearing Caroline speak alone with a hand on her face, I asked her why. She told me that she was explaining to Zug, the louse who had been so comforting during her captivity, how their liberation by these Air Commandos had taken place.

54

Finally freed!

Climbing into the sky of Fond-du-Lac, I was proud of my brother who had succeeded in this raid just as well as a professional soldier. In front of us, the night fled to the west, pursued by the first solar glows. Below us, the still black waters of Lake Athabaska stretched as far as the eye could see.

—*Are you okay, Caroline?* Jacques asked me every five minutes.

—*Very well! Thank you, bro!*

—*Are you happy?*

—*Very happy!*

—*Me too!*

After a 30-minute flight westwards to deceive possible pursuers, we headed due south, on Batoche. Exhausted but radiant on the muscular back of my Tania of Montmagny, I kept my lips wide open to swallow at the top of my lungs the fresh air of freedom and happiness. Because Freedom is like Love and Health, you have to lose them to rightly appreciate their true and priceless value.

Before our eyes stretched the forested landscapes of the Canadian Shield that Hudson's Bay wore as a sautoir, like a *river of diamonds* whose precious stones would have been the millions of sparkling and glistening lakes. To the east, rays of sunshine burst above the horizon, like sparks that came to ignite these diamonds with incandescent shards.

—*Jacques, don't you think we should meander in case we were chased?*

—*What do you mean?*

—*Instead of going straight to Batoche, we would zigzag so that the pursuers could not guess our destination.*

—*That's an excellent idea,* Jacques replied.

Tania of Montmagny who had listened to the suggestion, changed direction to the right.

—*Where are we here?* she asked an old red-breasted merganser that had greeted her with his big black-and-white head.

—*You fly over Lac-Cri, and you go towards Isle-à-la-Crosse,* replied the merganser.

I often turned around to check if we were not being chased, and I took the opportunity to give a few smiles to my brother Jacques or my friends the wild geese who had so courageously delivered me from the clutches and the claws of my mortal enemies. It's foolish to think about how much of their life energy some beings consume doing harm to others. Obviously, they take real pleasure in persecuting others, but they too suffer because their victims defend themselves.

We were approaching Batoche and I could feel in my chest the disordered "Boom! Boom!" of my heart, agitated by a growing impatience at the prospect of seeing my dear sister Valerie again. Soon we flew low over the small white church of St. Antoine de Padou. The geese were cackling loudly and we started calling:

—*Valerie! Valerie! We have arrived! Caroline is found!*

What an indescribable joy to embrace each other! And what a joy to tell her while crying the pursuit of the two brigands, then the final attack. The geese themselves pirouetted square-dances of joy.

—*I hope at least you haven't hurt them too much, because wounded birds are doomed to die. The animal world is merciless,* commented Valerie with her big heart.

We decided to descend to the south by only a few kilometers to blur the tracks. We stopped at L'Anse-au-Poisson⁶, a small right tributary of the South Saskatchewan River. This river flows at the bottom of a talweg all cluttered with thick bushes and bushy shrubs. The small Fish-Creek river sang between the pebbles and we camped at the bottom of the ravine, at the edge of the water. A fisherman heard us speak French and, after some surprise, addressed us:

—*Hello children, my name is Gérard Pagé. I come here very often to fish for trout. It is a very beautiful place.*



⁶ •Fish Creek today.

55

A Tale of the Mysterious Box.

I introduced my family, including the geese busy eating. Gerard still advised us to be more careful in the future by not getting too close to a stranger, even if he seems lovely.

—*You are certainly right, Mr. Pagé.*

—*To demonstrate once again that you should never trust appearances, I will tell you a nice little story.*

—*Oh yes, we love it!*

—*Okay, so listen to my story... A few years ago, a father reproached his five-year-old daughter for secretly buying a sheet of beautiful golden wrapping paper:*

—*We are too poor to waste our money," he said, very dissatisfied. What do you want to do with this paper?*

—*Wrapping a small gift under our Christmas tree.*

—*There is no point in packing a box, Geraldine. It's wasted money!*

However, the next morning, the child brought the gift to his father and said:

—*It was for you, my darling Daddy! I wanted to show you that I love you.*

Very embarrassed, his father regretted his anger of the day before and opened the box with intense emotion, until the moment when... He realized that the package was empty. Once again angry, he raised his voice:

—Really, it's totally absurd to offer an empty box. You're five years old. You should know that you always have to put something in the box!

It was then that with tears in her eyes, his daughter told him:

—But Daddy, the box is not empty. I filled it with kisses for you!

Totally upset, the father took his daughter in his arms and asked her forgiveness for his abruptness, indelicacy, and poor judgment. He had relied on appearances.

—He did as we did earlier, I said. We stopped here despite the presence of a stranger. We should have thought before we acted.

—That's exactly what I think. But I haven't finished my story. Shortly thereafter, the wire was accidentally killed by an intoxicated motorist. Inconsolable, the father had the chance to find the box of kisses. And, when disengagement and depression took over his mind, he drew an imaginary kiss from the golden box, and the memory of his child's love helped him survive.

—Your story is very sad, Monsieur Pagé.

—What are the two lessons that can be learned from this context? the fisherman asked.

—I think the first is to always think a long time before acting... But I don't see the second one...

—The second lesson is to know that every human being has a golden box, filled with the love of his parents, children, brothers, sisters and friends. But we must be able to find it, because the importance of love only appears clearly to those who lack it.

After telling us such a beautiful and sad story, Gérard Pagé left with his fishing rod. We spent the rest of the evening reminiscing about the fabulous adventures we had during this fantastic chase of Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-Bittern. It was so exciting that even Zug the louse had perched on one

of my hairs to hear better; and I took the opportunity to pay tribute to Zug for all the encouragement he had given me when I was exhausted, frightened, demoralized and about to let me die of despair. That's true friends. We were so attached to each other that he wouldn't leave me. For my part, despite the affection I had for him, I would have liked to part with him, because his presence in my hair embarrassed me a little.

The geese had laid all around to protect us in case of an unexpected attack. It was a real joy to have found my brother, my sister and my dear wild geese.



The Montréal skyline

56

The legend of the Qu'Appelle River

From the altitude of eight hundred meters where we had perched while flying over Strassbourg (Saskatchewan), just below a large white cumulus cloud, we could see on our left a large valley so strange and bewitching that Tania de Montmagny dragged the Grand V in this direction.

—*Maybe we could land at the edge of this lake to do a bit of toileting and cool off a little*, Jacques added.

Upon hearing this, the guide goose began a slow descent towards the water table. By nodding her little head wearing a kind of black scarf, an arctic tern passing by kindly informed us about the name of this lake-river that vacationers seemed to appreciate so much:

—*This is the Qu'Appelle River*, we were told by the bird very kindly. *Didn't you know?*

—*Who call?* James replied. *What do you mean? Who's she calling?*

—*Its name comes from an old Amerindian legend*, replied the stern adjusting its flight to that of the geese. *"A young Indian was rowing vigorously to get back to his village. He was happy because he had just returned from a hunting expedition to marry his fiancée who was patiently waiting for him. He was sailing in this valley when he heard a long howling, far in the wind. This howl was his name, carried on the breeze. He shouted: "Qu'Appelle" (Who is calling?). The echo began to*

⁷ • "*Qui appelle?*" (Who is calling?) in abbreviated local French.

repeat: "Qu'appelle? Qu'appelle? Who's calling?" The wind also kept whispering this question, and it was only when this young man arrived back home that he finally understood what it meant: his fiancée had died the night before. She had called him, and the evening wind had brought him her voice, from hill to hill, from river to river, and from cloud to cloud. The name has remained in this region, because if you listen carefully, in the evening, you still hear today the wind that carries the name of these poor betrothed.

—Why are legends about love so often sad? Valerie asked. Love should be the most precious thing on earth.

—Maybe because we expect too much from the love of others. We should not forget that love is like a picnic: you only find what you bring, I replied with a laugh. I had heard this phrase and I liked it.

After a few hours of flying over the flat meadows topped with very dry grass, the Prairie rose up, on our left, as if kittens were playing under a wool blanket. It was Cypress Hill Park. A pipit no bigger than a spun announced the Valley of the Dinosaurs.

—The Valley of the Dinosaurs? Were there dinosaurs here? We cried out together, with one voice.

—Yes, yes! the pipit has chirped, proud to play the tourist guide. Many dinosaurs lived here.

—How do you know that? There was no journalists at that time, Jacques joked.

—You are right, young man. There was no journalist. But today's paleontologists manage to reconstruct the past by studying fossils, the pipit rightly answered.

The terrain suddenly collapsed into a deep valley full of rounded and grayish sedimentary reliefs, the result of millennia of erosion.

—*How strange it is... How beautiful it is... It's magical...* they all exclaimed.

—*Well, we're going to land in this dream landscape. We'll see if it's as fun as from the sky,* whispered the goose-guide.

The wild geese landed on a tiny islet in the middle of the Red Deer River and each of us began to get busy with our evening activities.



Sioux Reserve, Fort Qu'Appelle, Sask.

57

The Chestermere Attack

Dawn silently spread across the Valley of the Dinosaurs and the province of Alberta named in honor of Princess Alberta of Hanover⁸. Finally, I was glad that I had not lived in that scary time and that I was only being hunted by Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-Bittern and not by a pteranodon or archaeopteryx.

At an altitude of three hundred and fifty meters, Tania of Montmagny headed southwest at my request and we soon flew over the Trans-Canada Highway. The sky was streaked with birds of a thousand colors: cormorants, pelicans, shearwaters and many other species. By mid-afternoon, the Calgary metropolitan area appeared to us in the distance, refreshed by a few artificial lakes. We were about to approach the city from the eastern suburbs when the attack occurred. Here's how it happened. We were flying over a lake⁹. I had observed that it was surrounded by beautiful opulent houses with, each, a small pier. But I give the floor to Valerie who has seen everything. At this time, she was riding the last wild goose.

—"I was daydreaming at the back of the pack, when my gaze was drawn to the sky by a black dot. A kind of swordfish arrow plunged at a vertiginous speed towards us. Looking carefully at

⁸ •Princess Louise-Caroline-Alberta of Hanover, daughter of Queen Victoria. Her name was also used to rename Lac-des-Petits-Poissons, which is now called Lake-Louise.

⁹ •Lake Chestermere.

this falling elongated meteorite, I distinguished the perfectly stiff body of the great Moron-the-Bittern, beak pointed forward like a falling Sword of Damocles. Oh no! Those scoundrels again! We thought that they had their lesson in Fond-du-Lac and that they had understood we were smarter than them! So, they would never be discouraged from doing evil."

"The danger was impending. Moron-the-Bittern, the meteorite, was going to fall... Yes... probably on Tania, piercing her from side to side and evaporating Caroline's little body to the point that she would never be found. Something had to be done, but what? Suddenly I shouted:

—"Tania, give way! Give way!" This was the usual cry when it was seen that the lead goose was tired and had to give way to the next one to come and fly in tail. Without even thinking, Tania then flapped her wings and gave a wing's stroke to move away from the tip of the flock of flying geese. It was during this reflex movement that the suicide bomber passed like a lightning rocket through Tania's wing feathers. Our guide goose made a sudden side-leap and my poor sister Caroline fell into the void like a tiny bran doll. She was screaming and waving her hands desperately. Undoubtedly, she would crash into the parched ground of the Prairie. A distant voice shouted, "You missed her, fool! Shak! Shak! You're really good-for-nothing, Moron-the-Bittern. You're even afraid of dying for me. Obviously you have no respect for the friend I am! A devoted friend like me. Shak! Shak! You don't love me. I am very unhappy!"

So it was again this scoundrel of Trickster-the-Shrike who wanted revenge for having failed his kidnapping in Saskatchewan. Why did they insist on harming us? What pleasure did they find in it? If they had devoted half the energy they put into doing good, they would have been so useful to the society of the birds. Instead of forgiving us for the audacity we had shown at L'Anse-aux-Meadows by defending the little ruffed grouse, the shrike locked itself in an eternal hatred and in a

constant suffering, which even revenge would not extinguish. Forgiveness is a remedy for suffering. It seems obvious to me that a truly intelligent being should not indulge in hatred and resentment.

I was falling dizzily into space over the town of Chestermere located in the remote eastern suburbs of Calgary. As I fell faster and faster, the wind whistled in my ears and I saw the earth and the sky swirling around me like the film of a disoriented and hysterical camera. I closed my mouth with my hand because the wind rushed into my lungs and choked me. I was clutching in my hand some remiges, the largest feathers of Tania. I visualized again in a single moment all those who loved me. I thought my poor parents were going to mourn my death.

Jacques and Valerie told me afterwards that they started shouting: "*Caroline has fallen... Caroline fell ...*" My little body was falling into the void at a dizzying speed. I was going to crash on the Prairie and die there in Calgary. If only I had had a parachute. My father, who had been a paratrooper in the army, had often told me anecdotes of plane jumps.

It was then that Tania of Montmagny, Violette of Berthier and Félix of Île d'Orléans showed great initiative and intelligence. Of course, I didn't realize it at the time, but I was told it later. The three immediately plunged, beaks forward, wings and paws back, like torpedoes, as fast as the earth's gravity would allow. Jacques watching from above immediately thought of the famous dive attack on Pearl Harbour.

Tania, who made herself as thin and slender as a javelin by bending as much as possible to all the laws of aerodynamics, finally managed to catch up with me (Caroline). Placing herself under me, she spread her wings to slow down my dizzying speed as a parachute. The operation was partly successful, as my fall slowed down tremendously, but I could not grasp her strong remiges or her neck. My poor wild goose who had been wounded by the bittern's attack had much merit in sacrificing

herself in this way in an attempt to save me. Animals can sometimes show an unimaginable spirit of abnegation.

I plunged back into space. That's when Felix rushed underneath and I fell on his back. It was a little hard because of the hard muscle mass between the wings. But, once again, the space, which seemed to make common cause with death and with Trickster-the-Shrike, sucked me down again. I was not far from the ground when Tania understood that I was going to fall into Chestermere Lake and not on land. Luckily, I did not yet know that this irrigation lake was only 1.8^m deep at most. It was, however, a good advantage since I wasn't falling too fast. Considering my tiny height, 1.8^m was equivalent to more than 16^m deep for a person of normal height¹⁰. Violette then skimmed right under me, just a little before I touched the water, and it further slowed my fall.

I heard a big and cool "Plouffffff!" the moment I came into contact with the water. I felt a kind of beneficial freshness when I disappeared into the bluish waters of the lake, and then, in shock, I lost consciousness. Tania, Violette and Felix then dived into the water, but I didn't go up, and they were looking for me everywhere. The rest of the Grand V soon landed in the company of Jacques and Valerie who were crying all the tears in their eyes. Tania shouted:

—You have to find a diving duck to search the bottom of the lake. Underwater, we are good for nothing!

The geese and ourselves were crying, when... A dark brown mass came out of the water like a sea monster. Everyone let out a cry of horror. They thought it was a beast that had just devoured me and was preparing to eat the geese and the other two children.

¹⁰ •I calculated this afterwards.

—*It's a dog, a chocolate Labrador!* Jacques shouted.

—*Oh! Look! He holds Caroline in his mouth,* Valerie replied.

—*Do you want us to attack the dog for him make his prey drop,* Iris asked.

—*No! On the contrary. This dog is saving Caroline!*

—*Oh how nice he is! What's your name, good dog?*

—*Ben Garlick!* simply replied the labrador by raising his drooping lips to the side; his mouth being encumbered by my little inanimate body



58

Three new friends

Clapping his paws with great energy, the dog headed to one of the beautiful riverside properties. The geese followed him. Of course, my brother and sister told me all this. Then I regained consciousness. Two little girls and a boy who were swinging in the garden approached. Jacques asked them for help and, after a first moment of surprise, they went to get doll clothes to change me, because I was, obviously, all wet.

Valerie asked them their names. The elder one was named Emilie, the younger one Anika and the boy Jack. The two girls treated me as mothers would have done. The dog Ben belonged to them. He thus saved all those who fell into the water. This is a great quality for a dog who lives by a lake.

—To save an adult person, they said, he slips his head under the victim's arm, like a real qualified rescuer, and he brings him back to the dock.

I was too small and he had to improvise by taking me in his mouth, as he would have done with his own puppies. The parents of the children were absent because they were both airline pilots, but their housekeeper Elsie took great care of all of us and our geese during the evening, because Tania of Montmagny decided to camp on site. Emilie looked very nice and very wise, and Anika and Jack had a naughty face. All three of them showed a great sense of hospitality.

In the evening, Philippe, their father, flew in. He was returning from a flight Calgary-Halifax-Calgary. We all had the meal served outside, on a garden table. Emilie made sure we eat. It was a very pleasant evening. Elsie served a double ration

of kibble to the geese, who quickly fell asleep under the care of Ben the Rescuer. The evening was spent peacefully eating sweets at the corner of a bread oven and barbecue. Philippe then told us *The Legend of Yffud, the Goalkeeper without a Face*. An urban legend from the city of Calgary.

—*One day, he said, teenagers were playing street hockey in a quiet suburban neighborhood when a child wearing a goalkeeper's mask came out of the darkness and asked to play. His name was Donnovan Yffud. When the game ended, Donnovan disappeared in the night but returned the following evening. After a few days, the rumor began to spread according to which "Donnovan only showed up with a mask because he was so ugly that he was afraid to scare others." Everyone's curiosity was boiling. One of the boys then decided to see the face of the stranger. For this, he sent the puck with great violence on the mask of the goalie which broke in two. To their surprise, the other overly curious children realized that Donnovan Yffud... had no face. The teenagers surrounded the poor little one who stood up and let out a loud cry, so powerful that all the ruffians on the street ran away and never dared to play in the streets of Calgary again. It is well known in this city that if you shout "Yfudd" three times in a row, it will bring you bad luck.*

Everyone was very surprised by this unusual story. The questions were rife:

—*But, do you think it was a ghost?* Alexie asked.

—*No! I don't believe in all this ghost nonsense*, Anika said, who held me in her arms, while Emilie knitted me a tiny wool vest because her grandmother Mimi had just taught her how to knit.

The day had been demanding with this new attack of the terrible duo. Zug, sheltered in the depths of my ear, in a bubble of air, had thought its last hour had come. Poor Zug!

59

The Bald Eagle

(The next day we went to Lake Louise in the Rocky Mountains.)

At Lake Louise, we slept a little longer than expected the next morning. Not because Tania let herself be convinced, but because the night before, she had unwisely drunk some liquid from a cup abandoned by a picnicker. It must have been a sleeping pill such as chamomile, hops or California poppy. No sooner had my Tania closed her eyes than she fell on her side and I suddenly had a very unpleasant fall during my first sleep. Fortunately, Tina of Mont-Joly took me under her wing and I was able to have a good night's rest.

Around 10:00 a.m., after washing in the emerald water of Lake Louise, we flew to British Columbia.

—I see the ridge marking the dividing line of water between the Atlantic and the Pacific, I exclaimed, as we had just left the lake.

Some peaks had chillily wrapped themselves up under hoods and toques of cotton clouds. I had noticed that the Trans-Canada Railway, which we could see very well below, had suddenly completely disappeared. A dark swift, happy with her knowledge, told us, by sinking her silver forehead, that the train had entered the mountain through a spiral tunnel.

—Spiral? What do you mean? I asked.

—I mean that to avoid too steep a gradient for Canadian Pacific trains, Canadian engineers dug spiral tunnels like giant mattress springs. Thus the slope remains at only 2.2%.

—*With modern machines, it is possible to make anything*, commented Jacques.

—*This is true, but these spiral tunnels were dug in 1909, with pickaxes and dynamite that had just been invented by Mr. Nobel.*

The railroad tracks reappeared at times, stealthily emerging from a mouse hole. It meandered, balancing on steep slopes like a mountaineer clinging to a wall, and it was expected at every moment to see it falling into unfathomable ravines at the bottom of which sometimes bubbled a silver thread. Some amazing trains of more than 120 cars slipped cautiously on these steep rails like the tightrope walkers of Cirque du Soleil on their steel wire.

—*We sailed like windsurfers in the rising air currents. Everywhere, mountains, warmly dressed in a thick forest mantle rushed to the sky.*

—*Look at the bald eagle how tall and beautiful it is*, Jacques exclaimed, pointing his finger to the sky.

Everyone looked up. Fifty meters higher, an immense eagle flew with the ease and distinction of an aristocrat, while three commoner crows bent on annoying him like jealous sharecroppers of their lord. One tried to pull a feather from him, the other gave him a hypocritical peck, while the third wanted to go around him to attack him cowardly from behind.

—*Why are they harassing it?* Jacques asked, always ready to rush to protect the orphan.

—*Because the eagle hardly defends himself. He simply flies with contempt. With its 2.50 m wingspan, he looks like a condor. He probably has too much confidence in himself...*

—*Or maybe he's paralyzed with fear?*

—*The result is the same. His passivity enrages the crows to attack him.*

Tania climbed a little higher and we approached the bald eagle. The crows took off, thinking that we had come to his aid.

—*Hello, majestic raptor!* whistled Tania to show our peaceful intentions.

—*Hello beautiful white palmipeds!* the reassured eagle said.

—*What did they want, these wretched crows?*

—*Hurting me!*

—*What for?*

—*Probably out of jealousy; because the ugly envies the beautiful, the poor hate the rich, the dishonest scorns the virtuous; Only the fool does not envy the intelligent, because he thinks himself very gifted...*

—*He's a philosopher, with that! Where are you going so majestically?* Valerie asked, to cut short her chatter.

—*I'm going home, beautiful wild goose!*

—*But I am not a goose,* cried Valerie.

The eagle turned its head and saw Valerie. He opened wide eyes of surprise.

—*Who are you to travel like this on a wild geese?*

—*I am Canadian and I cross my country with my brother and sister. But yourself, where do you come from?*

—*I'm from Oregon...*

—*Ah, so you're an American?*

—*No, I'm Canadian, but a few Americans came to capture me and my family in Canada and settle me in their US forests.*

—Hold on! And why?

—To symbolically represent their Nation! Unfortunately, the forest where I had been settled was so polluted that my whole family died of poisoning. Some of my neighbors were Canadians too: bison, wolves, foxes rehabilitated in the mountains. I avoided excessive intimacy and cordiality with them. Wolves, whether compatriots or not, are not always friendly. I am now alone, and so I am returning to my country to find a wife and get married.

—You're right, nothing beats heritages and roots.

—Our own symbol as Canadians is the castor, said Valerie. It is a hard-working, industrial and intelligent animal.

—It's remarkable to see how nations choose their national symbols. It is often out of pride.

—You say you're coming to get a Canadian wife, Roussette of Île-aux-Oies whispered timidly, approaching the eagle.

—Yes, the accipitridae replied¹¹.

—If you want,... I can follow you...

—I can't believe what I hear? cried the jays Félix. I thought you were more independent, Roussette!

—Quiet, Felix! I'm not part of your harem, as far as I know? I do not see myself all my life as a prisoner of these traditional, repetitive and obligatory migrations. I would like to find a companion and go live at home in Île-aux-Oies...

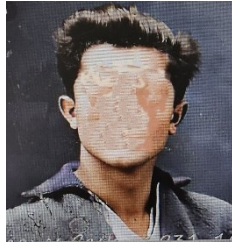
—But anyway, my dear, cut Tania of Montmagny to put an end to this sterile argument, you are not an eagle. And you couldn't

¹¹ • Accipitridae: Family of birds of prey like eagles, hawks, kites, harriers and vultures.

have a single eaglet with an eagle. Nature intended it that way and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

—That's what you say! Maybe I'll find a way to get married my way!

—That is just ambition! In any case, Roussette, put yourself in line! Violette gets tired because she has to endure all the air pressure, Tania ordered.



Jonathan Yffud, the faceless boy.

60

The legend of Ogopogo

Soon, however, the eagle nodded to announce that he had to leave the group. It veered into a valley that went northwest, while the wild geese continued south-southwest. Everyone felt a certain regret to see this knight of the air, so amiable. The greatest are always the most modest. Then a raven caught up with us to tell us that there's no such thing as jealousy between "commoner" ravens and so-called "aristocratic" eagles. In fact, the former hunt the latter to prevent them from stealing their young from their crows' nests. We continued through the Fraser Plateau, a totally arid landscape with grass –so short that the *coureurs-de-bois* called it *La Pelouse* as they called *La Prairie* the longest grass of the Western Plains; here and there, dry salt pans, white with salt¹².

Our wild geese flew over the great oasis of Kamloops. We landed a little further, on the shores of beautiful Lac Tranquille. It was a unique corner of freshness. Jacques set about preparing the campfire for the evening. Suddenly, a man came to sit on a tree trunk. He was an old man with drooping features, deep wrinkles that betrayed misfortune and hardship. I read in it a childhood without love and the many blows of life, the abandonments... He seemed deeply depressed, and I approached him quietly. He was speaking to himself in a low voice and recklessly gave us his thoughts. I could pick up snippets of phrases like, "... I really ruined my health... I burned my brain too long to have any chance of becoming a normal man again..." The man cried and sometimes took out a tissue to wipe his eyes. When I saw him so sad, I couldn't help but talk to him a little,

¹² • *La Pelouse* gave the word *Appaloosa*, name of the Nez Percé horses.

to cheer him up. We are all, at one time or another in our lives, struck by the foolishness of our mistakes and our blunders.

—*Sir, I'm sorry to see you so sad!*

The man looked around him for the source of that thin and delicate voice. He finally saw me, and, seized with fear, got up to run away.

—*Do not be afraid, sir, I am so small that there is no danger for you. Why are you so unhappy?*

Reassured, the stranger sat back down on the log lying in the grass.

—*Because I'm just a miserable man... When I was a child, I was very healthy. But I didn't know what wealth I had. I felt like it was normal, naturel and that I'd always have this advantage no matter what I did. So, later, I acted like many teenagers, I took drugs to please a dear friend who offered me, and little by little I became addicted. Eventually, narcotics led to my moral, mental and physical decline, and I was locked up in this nursing home here in Tranquille. It's a good place... When I saw this flock of geese, I decided to come and rest with them. But I never thought I would meet beings as unreal as you.*

—*We are real, sir, I told him, pinching my arm.*

—*But I would never dare to tell my friends, let alone hospital staff, that I have spoken to people like you, because they would not believe me and for fear that they would write negative comments in my medical file.*

The poor man was so depressed that we invited him to spend the rest of the evening with us. He accepted my invitation, and in front of the fire, told us a beautiful story:

—*We are, here, in the northern part of the Okanagan Valley. It is a region blessed by the gods where all kinds of fruits grow. There are even grapes, once planted in the region by a French*

missionary. He wanted to produce the communion wine for all the missionaries in the region. It's a very good wine...

He spoke calmly, and in his eyes danced our bonfire and its great creative imagery. He went on:

—*A large part of the Okanagan Valley is occupied by a sinuous lake in the shape of a long sea serpent. It turns out that in this same lake lives a giant reptile, greenish like the water of the lake some days. He is said to live at Squally Point. According to the description of more or less credible witnesses, Ogopogo is a snake of 50cm in diameter and 15m in length, of greenish color, as I said. He wears a horse's or goat's head according to the witnesses, crowned with two humps and underlined with a goatee. Its body that undulates to move, in the usual manner of reptiles, is surmounted along its entire length by triangular fins, similar to the scales of dinosaurs of past times. The Ogopogo feeds on freshwater crustaceans. According to an Indian legend, the snake was actually a man possessed by the Spirit of Evil. He had murdered someone from the country named Oh-Kan-Hi-Kan.*

—*What a strange name!* James whispered. *Is this where the name Okanagan comes from?*

—*No doubt!* the man continued. *The Manitou immediately changed the murderer into a marine serpent that disappeared into the depths of the lake. For a long time the Indians and then the settlers were frightened by the presence of this animal. This snake, which is nowadays quite adorable, is also most useful, since it attracts tourists. Some traders in the region claim to have seen him, and even photographed him. But it seems that his presence is unleashing the cameras of these merchants, because the photos always come out blurry.*

—*It's amazing!* Valerie said. *It's like the Loch Ness Monster.*

—*Absolutely,* he added.

But just as the man was preparing to continue his most interesting story, a surprising event happened. Two white ghosts appeared in the darkness of the night that had long fallen. They seized forcibly the storyteller who began to protest vigorously:

—Why are you bringing me back. I didn't do anything wrong. I tell these children the story of Ogopogo...

—Yes, Joseph! answered one of the two ghosts in a white lab smock. The problem is that I only see snow geese, and, besides, it is midnight and all the patients in this hospital have been sleeping for a long time. You should be sleeping too in your bed, Joseph! So the best would be to come back tomorrow night to tell the rest of this anecdote to these... winged children.

When they disappeared, everyone went sleep.



Ogopogo monster.

61

The terrible fight of herons

A trout caught by a diving duck from Lake Tranquille, and cooked on our rekindled fire, is what we had lunch with that morning. This is probably the most delicious brunch of this whimsical journey. Because I admit that we have often been content with wild fruit and bird eggs, which is certainly not a desirable diet, especially when this menu is recurrent. But we had, during this trip, the unconsciousness of youth. A month of this diet could not jeopardize our health permanently, because we knew that soon the balanced diet of our parents would come to restore some order in this momentary anarchy.

Going up in altitude that morning, I could see the patients coming out in the hospital park. One of them, probably the one who had given us his heart for so long the night before, immediately went to the corner of the park where he had met us. But we were gone, and from afar, when he was only a small beige dot in the greenery of the park, I guessed that he must have been very disappointed not to find us there. It made my heart clench in my throat.

Below us meandered the Coquihalla Highway amid parched landscapes dotted with mugwort. Further on, the great Fraser River, tired, staled peacefully and let itself be carried away by its momentum in its long and flat delta. The small *Greenwood Island* had become a sanctuary for blue egrets. We decided to land for a few minutes in this island to breathe a little. We enjoyed lingonberries, beautiful as cherries.

—We're so good here," said Valerie. We would want to stay there all our life.

But no sooner had she said this, than a group of egrets and herons, who had approached us discreetly, without showing their intent, suddenly assaulted us. Our nonviolent geese first ran away, but Tania of Montmagny began to cry out with all her might to rally her troops and force them to stand up against the quarrelsome herons. For nothing is more dangerous than panic. It discourages victims and encourages abusers.

Valerie, Jacques and I found refuge between the paws of Tania and Felix, who fought like lionesses, to protect us with the courage and energy of despair. Because we were so small that the slightest heron could have sent us flying through the air and engulf us in one bite like a simple grasshopper. So I advised my brother and sister to bring a rigid branch of our size, 20 or 25cm, and to hold it securely across to avoid passing too easily in their narrow throat. Thus, the birds could no longer swallow us. But after reflection they could have carried us away and dropped us on the ground. I still see all those beaks, yellow, gray, white, beige, trying to catch us, and the fury of our geese fighting. What a legendary battle! The raging herons whirled like dervishes. Even today, I have nightmares about it. And suddenly I understood. I understood everything when I heard in the hubbub the cries of our two enemies, Moron-the-Bittern and Trickster-the-Shrike, who, perched on a branch, encouraged the herons:

—Catch them! You're winning! They are weakening. Schak! Schak!

—Kill them! Ounk-eu-lunk! Kill them!

I was furious and shouted at them:

—Loser! Coward! Come and fight by yourselves!

But suddenly, I heard Tania de Montmagny scream:

—Mariette and Genevieve, take your children, take off as quickly as possible and climb as high as possible, at an altitude

of 2,500m! All these herons will not be able to follow you. You will be reached as soon as possible. Violette of Berthier, take Caroline and follow the other two. The main thing is to save the children.

Unquestionably, she knew how to command, and she spoke as if she were our mother... a responsible and loving mother willing to sacrifice her life for us. What a sense of responsibility! In a few seconds, we jumped on the neck of our geese who managed to get out of the fray, not without losing some feathers.



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Death of Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-Bittern

Fifteen minutes later, everyone was safe at high altitude, and the Great V headed for Vancouver, or rather White-Rock. As we approached the latter city, where, according to what I had been told in Montreal, our parents lived, we felt a great overexcitement rising in us. What a sublime joy to find them again! How were my room and my brother and sister's bedrooms? I was hoping to have a room all to myself. It wasn't long before I was a teenager and my parents had always promised to get me a private room that I could decorate according to my tastes. We couldn't wait to see them again! Nothing beats a long separation to make us appreciate our parents. They want to protect us from all the dangers of life so much so that they become annoying. If they could let us live, play, waste time, enjoy our hobbies like children! I thought that at the time, but now I have children and my opinion is different.

I was at this point in my thoughts when two explosions blasted in the calm coolness of the morning:

Bang! Bang!

We had barely heard the explosions when two dark masses passed before our eyes at a dizzying speed. The two birds went to join the hunters' gibecières.

—*Oh! Iris said. It's Trickster-the-Shrike and Moron-the-Bittern. They are dead!*

I was totally stunned to hear that. Our two diehard enemies were suddenly dead. Impossible! So they were above us spying on us and probably cooking up another bad move. I felt

a certain satisfaction deep inside myself so I was very ashamed, because I do not want to rejoice in the misfortune of others.

—What happens?... What is it?... everyone shouted.

—Run away! Get away as soon as possible! There are hunters on the ground. Away from here, screamed an arctic tern.

—Is it Jean-Philippe?... Is it the terrible Jean-Philippe?... a kingfishers shouted. This is Jean-Philippe, the great hunter never empty-handed. He loves ducks too much!

—But it was not ducks that he killed, replied a mallard who had just greeted us as he passed us in the azure sky. It is a shrike and a bittern. They are protected by law.

—*So he made a mistake. All these weapons are dangerous; They should be outright forbidden, added a red-bellied flycatcher. He dresses like Nimrod, he has a great Joe dog of pure Labrador-chocolate breed and he wants his son Jean-Marc to become a skilled hunter like him.*

Valerie started singing:

♫ *When people will live with love,
there will be no more misery,
soldiers will become troubadours.* ♪ ...

—*Why are you singing this Raymond Lévesque's song, Valérie?* I asked.

—*Because this killing hurts my heart.*



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The legend of White Rock

Far from being interested in all these considerations, Tania immediately climbed in altitude to keep his little community as far away as possible from the famous "local trigger". Further on, a sparrow told us that we were now flying over the city of Surrey.

—*Where is White Rock?* I asked him. *This is where my parents moved,... on Columbia Avenue.*

—*White Rock is a seaside resort south of the city of Surrey, right on the border of the United States.*

—*You who know so many things, sparrow-of-LeConte, perhaps you would know why this city is so called?*

—*Of course,* replied the bird, which was suffocating with pride, because birds like humans are conceited. *According to an Indian legend, the white rock was once on an island in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, there! But one day, the son of the God of the Sea fell deeply in love with a young Cowichan princess.*

—*What a great story!* Valerie murmured while dreaming.

—*Hold on. Don't rejoice too quickly. The fathers of the lovers, who at that distant time still had much authority over their family, refused the choice of their children: the God of the Sea because the young princess was not a goddess; and the father of the Cowichan girl too, just in anger against the God of the Sea. Then, furious at being refused, the boy grabbed a huge white boulder in front of him and threw it towards dry land. The rock landed in the middle of this fine basaltic sand beach where it is currently located: the beach of Semihamou which means half-*

moon in Salish. The demigod then took his princess in his strong arms and the lovers came to live their honeymoon at White-Rock in the half-moon beach of Semihamoo.

—What a beautiful love story! Valerie repeated.

—You said that your parents now live in White Rock. We are currently flying over this small seaside resort. You see the long quay of almost 500 meters down here, well it is part of your new city of residence.

—Let's get down, let's go down," James cried,

—The address is,... See... 15185 Columbia Avenue.

—Here is Columbia Avenue, whispered the spout, pointing the tip of its beak towards a house on the slope.

—I see our dog Sorbonne, I see Sorbonne! I shouted. There, on the terrace of this beige house. There! "SORBONNE! SORBONNE! It's us, Caroline, Jacques and Valerie!

On the terrace overlooking the sea, a big black Belgian shepherd came out of his sleep to raise his head, looking incredulously. Suddenly he saw me, as I leaned dangerously over the wing of Tania of Montmagny. He then started barking happily, and Tania made a gesture of fear:

—No Tania, you can land. Our dog is happy to see us again. He makes a lot of noise but he's not mean. He is simply enthusiastic and boisterous.

I asked our big Sorbonne to keep silent and stay in a corner of the terrace so as not to scare away the shy geese. We all landed on the vast deck. Our dog was so amazed to recognize our smell when we were so tiny. Hearing the hubbub, my mother Marie-France arrived, probably ready to send away those geese that might damage her balcony.

—*No Mom, please, don't evict us away, it's us, your children!* I exclaimed.

My mother was deliriously happy. She didn't know what to do to please us. My father eventually arrived, too.

—*I confess that we were beginning to wonder if we'd ever see you again in your entirety... So, my dear children, tell us about your trip? What did you see?* he asked. *You probably have a thousand adventures to tell us.*

—*Dad, we're very tired,* I said. *We'll tell you all about it later.*



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The legend of Lost Lagoon

The late afternoon and evening were very pleasant. Mom and Dad prepared a nice meal. The geese, who were quietly installed on the balcony, received a full bag of green grass that the neighbor gave us. He had just mowed his lawn. While we were all, including the geese, in a circle on the large balcony, I asked my father to tell us a legend of the region because I suspected that he already knew some of them. He is very fond of local legends. To our delight, he replied:

—I may, if you wish, tell you the story of the two princesses of the lost lagoon.

—With pleasure, Dad. We listen to you!

—Tomorrow, when you fly over Vancouver, you will see, just north of the city, two small peaks that crown the mountain range. The English saw lions there and so called the great Vancouver Bridge, the Lions' Gate Bridge. In reality, these two small peaks are petrified Indian princesses...

—Petrified? Valerie asked. As the Alberta dinosaurs?

—It's almost true, they were turned into stone by the Manitou... Thousands and thousands of years ago, my father continued, these two mountain peaks did not exist. At that time, large Indian tribes occupied the area, including the northern Kwakiutl and the Vancouver Salish. These early Canadians hunted whales around Vancouver Island and fished for salmon and rainbow trout that each year descend from the Rocky Mountains into the tumultuous waters of rivers that you may have been able to admire.

—Yes, it was beautiful, Jacques replied. We have seen some.

—*The Salish paramount chief, my father continued, had set up his large hut near the Lost Lagoon, which was reconstructed today at Stanley Park.*

—*We will have to visit this park, said Valerie.*

—*From there, he organized monthly war expeditions against his hereditary enemies, the Indians of the North Coast, of the Prince Rupert region.*

—*Why were these tribes at war with each other?* I asked.

—*No one really knew it, but they hated each other so much that the brave warriors were very happy to show their courage, and in addition they took booty and prisoners of war who became their slaves.*

—*You mean slavery existed?*

—*Absolutely. Each tribe had Native American slaves... So I continue... For the brave Salish, fighting against the Kwakiutl tribes of the North Coast had become a true tradition that allowed them to test their courage and manliness. In every generation, families lost brothers and sisters in this eternal war, and Eternity would be too short to avenge all these deaths.*

—*That's terrible!* whispered the peaceful Jacques.

The Grand Chief of the Salish, therefore, had two very intelligent, very beautiful and very sweet daughters. He loved them very much and would have done anything to please them. By tradition, the tribes of the Setting Sun celebrated the events of life with great festivals that sometimes lasted a whole week: birth, adolescence, marriage... Adolescence is the time, difficult and wonderful at the same time, when the child becomes an adult. That year, spring warmed the snow-covered mountains that surround the area where our beautiful city of Vancouver is today, when the two young princesses felt their bodies transform and they began to become women.

—*Like us in a few years, I said.*

—*That's right!* my father agreed. *The father of these girls, the Chief of the Salish, immediately decided to organize big parties to celebrate this memorable event. He sent messengers to all the*

branches to invite friendly tribes to a feast called a potlatch, and had a large quantity of food and gifts prepared to distribute to the guests. Other property was set aside for destruction.

—Destroyed? But it's unbelievable!

—Yes. The rich Indians, especially among the Kwakiutl, liked at the time to impress their guests not only by giving them gifts but also by destroying beautiful things to show that they were so rich that it left them indifferent. It happened to some rich people to ruin themselves out of absurdity of vanity.

—And the war with the tribes of the North Coast? Valerie asked.

—No problem for war. They delayed the next military campaign by a week or two. In the meantime, they just ignored their enemies. A powerful leader like him could let his enemies shout their provocations and insults, while he celebrated his dear daughters. After the potlatch, the Kwakiutl tribes would pay dearly for their insolence...

—Good idea to make a truce, commented Jacques.

A few days before the potlatch, the Grand Chief went to his daughters and said:

—You know I love you more than anything in the world? Isn't it?

—Yes, father, they replied. And we love you very much, too.

—Well, added the venerable Indian chief, I want to offer you an exceptional, extraordinary gift... Think about it seriously. Choose anything; what you've been dreaming about for a long time. From now on, I accept your choice. I give you until tomorrow to think about it.

The next day, the two girls appeared before their father:

—Father, we have made our choice!

—I am very happy with that. As I promised, I accept in advance anything you want. But... What do you want?

—We want to...

—*Come on! Talk. Don't hesitate!*

—*We want to... You promised that you would accept...*

—*Yes! I promised. What do you want?*

—*We want you to invite to the big potlatch...*

—*Who, then?*

—*The chiefs of the North Coast tribes!* the two princesses answered with only one voice.

The Grand Chief remained speechless in amazement.

—*Father, you promised us...*

—*But... You are completely crazy.*

—*Father, you promised us...*

—*We are at war with them!*

—*Father, you promised...*

—*This is the most extravagant suggestion I've ever heard!*

Eventually, the Grand Chief resigned himself to keeping his promise. He sent messengers to the north to invite the Kwakiutl tribes to the potlatch. But the enemy leaders first sniffed out a trap. Then, learning of the extraordinary request of the two girls, they agreed to participate in the celebrations.

During the potlatch, the Grand Chief of the Salish gave many gifts to the Chiefs of the North Coast. That was tradition. Seated in the places of honor on a throne located on the edge of the lost lagoon, the two princesses could see all these Indian chiefs giving each other gifts while smiling, when the week before they thought only of slaughtering each other mercilessly. And that's how peace came to the region. A few years later, when the two princesses became very old,...

—*A few years? Dad, you mean*

—Many years later, I cut off.

—Life seems very long when you are young, and very short when you are old. Anyway! Many years later, the Manitou decided that the two princesses should remain on earth to oversee peace in the region. So he took them in his hands and placed them on top of a mountain north of Burrard Inlet.

Oh, really? Valerie said.

Oh, really! They are still there. You will see them tomorrow from your wild geese. They are even more beautiful when the sun of summer evenings colours them with pink and ochre. Thanks to them, Vancouver has become a clean city, without nuclear weapons. The capital of Greenpeace, therefore of Peace! There you go! The story is over, my father concluded.

—Oh! It's sad! Valerie said.

—On the contrary, Mom corrected. It is a very nice story!

—Yes, but, the sad thing is that the story is over... and our trip almost too.

—Yes, for us it will be a relief. We would die of worry to know you God-know-where! Now you have to sleep!

The geese had already been sleeping for a long time, their beaks stung into the down of their own backs; as they usually do, while the moon had pulled the black curtain of the night to let all living beings rest.

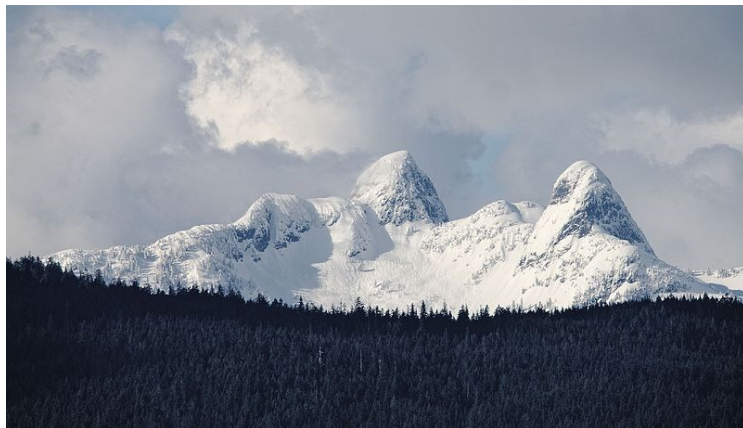
In the evening, I caught my mother watching the geese on the terrace.

—What are you doing, Mom?"

—You see, I'm looking at your geese. They sleep confidently. In fact, I was curious about how they slept.

—Well, for my part, I'm going to bed. It's two o'clock in the morning. Good night my lovely Caroline, she said to me as she kissed me. I can't wait for you to get back to your normal size.

—Good night, Mom. I love you.



The two Amerindian princesses, also known to some as Vancouver's Two Lions

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Epilogue

When I opened my eyes, on this last morning of our trip, Jacques was observing the cocoon that a budding butterfly was trying to pierce. He put so much effort into it that my big-hearted brother wanted to help him. He took scissors and, without any difficulty, cut the silk edges of the cocoon. The butterfly came out very easily, but the poor being could no longer open his wings which remained stuck and atrophied. So Valérie, who had always been interested in life sciences, explained the reason for this disability:

—You see, you should not have removed all his difficulties because it is by struggling with courage, energy and even violence to make his hole in the cocoon, that the butterfly strengthens his muscles and circulates the bodily fluids that allow his body to develop. By removing all the difficulties of his childhood, he has been handicapped and disarmed, for now he can no longer fly and will not be able to do so. And if he ever succeeds, it will be after exhausting efforts. Your too great a kindness kept him in weakness.

We had lunch of cereals, then the geese carried us into the sky dotted with small white and cottony cumulus, quite harmless and which we had learned to love because, with the birds, they had been our only travel companions in the sky, throughout this long trip. Pacific dogwoods, symbols of our province of British Columbia, bloomed the landscape with their white bouquets. And then Victoria offered herself to our eyes.

We were sad to think that this was the end of our trip, going to Victoria, the provincial capital. The geese were going

to go south, to continue their wandering life, and we were going to resume our human size and find our place on the benches of the school in the midst of our fellow human beings. We had lived extraordinary adventures and we thought that no one would believe us if we wanted to tell them. That's why I waited so long before I decided to share them with my friends.

We had given our parents a meeting place in front of the monument that marks the "*Kilometer 0*" or "*Kilometer 7,821*", the end of the Trans-Canada Highway, the longest road in the world. This monument is erected in Beacon Hill Park. Circling above, before landing, we spotted their old Rideau car. They were waiting for us, anxious to see us safe and sound. For them, this wonderful adventure had been nothing but torment and anguish from the ma- tin until the evening. I do not wish any parent to have a similar experience, but, paradoxically, I wish every child in the world to go like this on the backs of birds. And if they cannot find, like us or like Niels Olgerson, a sorcerer who agrees to transform them into tiny tomtes, they can at least travel in u.l.m. in the company of migratory birds, like Christian Moullec who crisscrossed the skies of France, Sweden and the Baltic Sea.

And then, we had to resolve to say goodbye to our wonderful wild geese who were going to continue their distant journeys to shores still unexplored. Everyone was crying; even the geese. And if an ornithologist assures you that geese cannot cry, I can assure you that I have seen them shed tears. With our arms tightly wrapped around their necks, we kissed them. Then, through our tears, we saw the Great V rise into the cloudless sky of the Juan de Fuca Strait, and, after becoming only a tiny dot on our retina, merge above the Olympics Mountains and Puget Sound, in the nebulous blur of our minds.

Voilà! Thus ends my travel journal. A few days later, we returned to our normal size. One morning, when we woke up,

we were grown up. In September, we started our school year at École Gabrielle-Roy in the city of Surrey. Later, I became an airline pilot for a major Canadian company, and I often see with emotion a site that I had flown over on the back of my dear wild goose, Tania de Montmagny. Jacques became a Correctional Officer Trainer and Valerie a Nursing Professor. In any case, I will always keep an imperishable memory of this trip and I am happy to have relived it in your company, dear Reader of this story.



Here is my parents's Rideau.

Three children are willingly reduced to miniature size by an Amerindian wizard. They decide to travel from Newfoundland to Canada's West Coast on the backs of wild geese. They are pursued by two mean birds eager to do them harm... thrilling adventures enhanced by local legends in each of the ten provinces.

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